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VIOLA ALLEN AS THE WHITE SISTER

THE WHITE SISTER

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

AUTHOR OF "THE DIVA'S RUBY," "SARACINESCA," "IN THE PALACE OF THE KING," ETC., ETC.

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THE WHITE SISTER

CHAPTER I

'I CANNOT help it,' said Filmore Durand quietly. 'I paint what I see. If you are not pleased with the likeness, I shall be only too happy to keep it.'

The Marchesa protested. It was only a very small matter, she said, a something in the eyes, or in the angle of the left eyebrow, or in the turn of the throat; she could not tell where it was, but it gave her niece a little air of religious ecstasy that was not natural to her. If the master would only condescend to modify the expression the least bit, all would be satisfactory.

Instead of condescending, Filmore Durand smiled rather indifferently and gave his pallet and brushes to his man, who was already waiting at his elbow to receive them. For the famous American portrait-painter detested all sorts of litter, such as a painting-table, brush-jars, and the like, as much as his great predecessor Lenbach ever did, and when he was at work his old servant brought him a brush, a tube of colour, a knife, or a pencil, as each was needed, from a curtained recess where everything was kept ready and in order.

'I like it as it is,' said Giovanni Severi, resting his hands on the hilt of his sabre, as he sat looking thoughtfully from the portrait to the original.

The young girl smiled, pleased by his approbation of the likeness, which she herself thought good, though it by no means flattered. On the contrary, it made her look older than she was, and much more sad; for though the spring laughed in her eyes when she looked at the officer to whom people said she was engaged, their counterparts in the portrait were deep and grave. Certain irregularities of feature, too, were more apparent in the painting than in nature. For instance, there was a very marked difference between the dark eyebrows; for whereas the right one made a perfect curve, the other turned up quite sharply towards the forehead at the inner end, as if it did not wish to meet its fellow; and the Marchesa del Prato was quite sure that Angela's delicate nose had not really that aquiline and almost ascetic look which the great master had given it. In fact, the middle-aged woman almost wished that it had, for of all things that could happen she would have been best pleased that her niece should turn out to have a vocation and should disappear into some religious order as soon as possible. This was not likely, and the Marchesa was by no means ready to accept, as an alternative, a marriage with Giovanni Severi, whom she had long looked upon as her own private property.

Filmore Durand glanced from one to another of the three in quick succession, stroked his rather bristly moustache, and lit a cigarette, not because he wanted to smoke, but because he could not help it, which is a very different thing. Then he looked at his picture and

forgot that he was not alone with it; and it still pleased him, after a fashion, though he was not satisfied with what he had done.

Great artists and great writers are rarely troubled by theories; one of the chief characteristics of mature genius is that it springs directly from conception to expression without much thought as to the means; a man who has used the same tools for a dozen years is not likely to take his chisel by the wrong end, nor to hesitate in choosing the right one for the stroke to be made, much less to 'take a sledge-hammer to kill a fly,' as the saying is. His unquiet mind has discovered some new and striking relation between the true and the beautiful; the very next step is to express that relation in clay, or in colour, or in words. While he is doing so he rarely stops to think, or to criticise his own half-finished work; he is too sure of himself, just then, to pause, and, above all, he is too happy, for all the real happiness he finds in his art is there, between the painfully disquieting ferment of the mental chaos that went before and the more or less acute disappointment which is sure to come when the finished work turns out to be less than perfect, like all things human. It is in the race from one point to the other that he rejoices in his strength, believes in his talent, and dreams of undying glory; it is then that he feels himself a king of men and a prophet of mankind; but it is when he is in this stage that he is called vain, arrogant, and self-satisfied by those who do not understand the distress that has gone before, nor the disillusionment which

will follow soon enough, when the hand is at rest and cool judgment marks the distance between a perfect ideal and an attainable reality. Moreover, the less the lack of perfection seems to others, the more formidable it generally looks to the great artist himself.

It was often said of Durand that his portraits were prophetic; and often again that his brushes were knives and scalpels that dissected his sitters' characters upon the canvas like an anatomical preparation.

'I cannot help it,' he always said. 'I paint what I see.'

It was not his fault if pretty Donna Angela Chiaromonte had thrown a white veil over her dark hair, just to try the effect of it, the very first time she had been brought to his studio, or that she had been standing beside an early fifteenth century altar and altar-piece which he had just bought and put up at one end of the great hall in which he painted. He was not to blame if the veiling had fallen on each side of her face, like a nun's head-dress, nor if her eyes had grown shadowy at that moment by an accident of light or expression, nor yet if her tender lips had seemed to be saddened by a passing thought. She had not put on the veil again, and he had not meant that a suggestion of suffering ecstatically borne should dim her glad girlhood in his picture; but he had seen the vision once, and it had come out again under his brush, in spite of him, as if it were the necessary truth over which the outward expression was moulded like a lovely mask, but which must be plain in her face to every one who had once had a glimpse of it.

The painter contemplated his work in silence from within an Olympian cloud of cigarette smoke that almost hid him from the others, who now exchanged a few words in Italian, which he only half understood. They spoke English with him, as they would have spoken French with a Frenchman, and probably even German with a German, for modern Roman society has a remarkable gift of tongues and is very accomplished in other ways.

'What I think most wonderful,' said the Marchesa del Prato, who detested her husband's pretty niece, 'is that he has not made a Carlo Dolce picture of you, my dear. With your face, it would have been so easy, you know!'

Giovanni Severi's hands moved a little and the scabbard of his sabre struck one of his spurs with a sharp clink; for he was naturally impatient and impulsive, as any one could see from his face. It was lean and boldly cut; his cheeks were dark from exposure rather than by nature, there were reddish lights in his short brown hair, and his small but vigorous moustache was that of a rather fair man who has lived much in sun and wind in a hot climate. His nose was Roman and energetic, his mouth rather straight and hard; yet few would have thought his face remarkable but for the eyes, which betrayed his nature at a glance; they were ardent rather than merely bold, and the warm, reddish-brown iris was shot with little golden points that coruscated in the rays of the sun, but emitted a fiery light of their own when his temper was roused.

If his look had been less frank and direct, or if his other features had suggested any bad quality, his eyes would probably have been intolerably disagreeable to meet; as it was, they warned all comers that their possessor was one of those uncommon and dangerous men who go to the utmost extremes when they believe themselves in the right and are constitutionally incapable of measuring danger or considering consequences when they are roused. Giovanni Severi was about eight-and-twenty, and wore the handsome uniform of an artillery officer on the Staff. He had not liked the Marchesa's remark, and the impatient little clink of his scabbard against his spur only preceded his answer by a second.

'Happily for Angela,' he said, 'we are not in the studio of a caricaturist.'

The Marchesa, who could be near-sighted on occasion, put up her tortoiseshell-mounted eyeglass and looked at him aggressively; but as he returned her gaze with steadiness, she soon turned away.

'You are extremely rude,' she said coldly.

For she herself made clever caricatures in water-colours, and she knew what Giovanni meant. Angela's mother had been a very devout woman and had died young, but had incurred the hatred of the Marchesa by marrying the very man whom the latter had picked out for herself, namely, the elder of two brothers, and the Marchesa had reluctantly consented to marry the other, who had a much less high-sounding title and a far smaller fortune. She had revenged herself in vari-

ous small ways, and had often turned her brother-in-law's wife to ridicule by representing her as an ascetic mediæval saint, in contorted attitudes of ecstasy, with sunken cheeks and eyes like saucers full of ink. Like many other people, Giovanni had seen some of these drawings, for the resentful Marchesa had not destroyed them when the Princess Chiaromonte died; but no one had yet been unkind enough to tell Angela of their existence. The girl did not like her aunt by marriage, it was true, but with a singularly simple and happy disposition, and a total absence of vanity, she apparently possessed her mother's almost saintly patience, and she bore the Marchesa's treatment with a cheerful submission which exasperated the elder woman much more than any show of temper could have done.

Just now, seeing that trouble of some sort was imminent, she made a diversion by coming down from the low movable platform on which her chair had been placed for the sitting, and she spoke to the artist while she studied her own portrait. Durand was a very thin man, and so tall that Angela had to look very high to see his face as she stood beside him.

'I could never be as good as the picture looks,' she said in English, with a little laugh, 'nor so dreadfully in earnest! But it is very nice of you to think that I might!'

'You will never be anything but good,' answered Filmore Durand, 'and it's not necessarily dreadful to be in earnest about it.'

'You are a moralist, I see,' observed the Marchesa,

putting on a sweet smile as she rose and came forward, followed by Giovanni.

'I don't know,' replied the painter. 'What is a moralist?'

'A person who is in earnest about other people's morals,' suggested Angela gaily.

'Really!' cried the Marchesa, with a most emphatic English pronunciation of the word. 'One would think that you had been brought up in a Freemasons' lodge!'

In view of the fact that Angela's father was one of the very last survivors of the 'intransigent' clericals, this was quite the most cutting speech the Marchesa could think of. But Filmore Durand failed to see the point.

'What has Freemasonry to do with morality?' he inquired with bland surprise.

'Nothing at all,' answered the Marchesa smartly, 'for it is the religion of the devil.'

'Dear me!' The artist smiled. 'What strong prejudices you have in Rome!'

'Are you a Freemason?' the noble lady asked, with evident nervousness; and she glanced from his face to Angela, and then at the door.

'Well — no — I'm not,' the painter admitted with a slight drawl, and evidently amused. 'But then I'm not a moralist either, though I suppose I might be both and yet go on painting about the same.'

'I think not,' said the Marchesa so stiffly that Giovanni almost laughed aloud. 'We must be going,' she added, suddenly relaxing to graciousness again. 'It

has been such a privilege to see you day after day, my dear Mr. Durand, and to watch you working in your own surroundings. My brother-in-law will come to-morrow. I have no doubt that he will be much pleased with the portrait.'

Filmore Durand smiled indifferently but with politeness as he bowed over the Marchesa's hand. He did not care a straw whether Angela's father liked the picture or not, being in love with it himself, and much more anxious to keep it than to be paid for it.

'When shall I see you again?' Giovanni had asked of Angela, almost in a whisper, while the Marchesa was speaking.

Instead of answering she shook her head, for she could not decide at once, but as her glance met his a delicate radiance tinged her cheeks for a moment, as if the rosy light of a clear dawn were reflected in her face. The young soldier's eyes flashed as he watched her; he drew his breath audibly, and then bit his upper lip as if to check the sound and the sensation that had caused it. Angela heard and saw, for she understood what moved him, so far as almost childlike simplicity can have intuition of what most touches a strong man. She was less like the portrait now than a moment earlier; her lips, just parting in a little half-longing, half-troubled smile, were like dark rose leaves damp with dew, her eyelids drooped at the corners for an instant, and the translucent little nostrils quivered at the mysterious thrill that stirred her maiden being.

The two young people had not known each other

quite a year, for she had never seen Severi till she had left the convent to go out into society and to take her place at her widowed father's table as his only child; but at their first meeting Giovanni had felt that of all women he had known, none but she had ever called his nature to hers with the longing cry of the natural mate. At first she was quite unconscious of her power, and for a long time he looked in vain for the slightest outward sign that she was moved when she saw him making his way to her in a crowded drawing-room, or coming upon her suddenly out of doors when she was walking in the villa with her old governess, the excellent Madame Bernard, or riding in the Campagna with her father. Giovanni's duties were light, and he had plenty of time to spare, and his pertinacity in finding her would have been compromising if he had been less ingeniously tactful. It was by no means easy to meet her in society either, for, in spite of recent social developments, Prince Chiaromonte still clung to the antiquated political mythology of Blacks and Whites, and strictly avoided the families he persisted in calling 'Liberals,' on the ground that his father had called them so in 1870, when he was a small boy. It was not until he had bored himself to extinction in the conscientious effort to take the girl out, that he appealed to his sister-in-law to help him, though he knew that neither she nor his brother was truly clerical at heart. Even then, if it had been clear to him that Giovanni Severi had made up his mind to marry Angela if he married at all, the Prince would have forced him-

self to bear agonies of boredom night after night, rather than entrust his daughter to the Marchesa; but such an idea had never entered his head, and he would have scouted the suggestion that Angela would ever dare to encourage a young man of whom he had not formally approved; and while she was meeting Giovanni almost daily, and dancing with him almost every evening, her father was slowly negotiating an appropriate marriage for her with the eldest son of certain friends who were almost as clerical and intransigent as himself. The young man was a limp degenerate, with a pale face, a weak mouth, and an inherited form of debility which made him fall asleep wherever he was, if nothing especial happened to keep his eyes open; he not only always slept from ten at night till nine the next morning with the regularity of an idiot, but he went to sleep wherever he sat down, in church, at dinner, and even when he was driving. Neither his own parents nor Prince Chiaromonte looked upon this as a serious drawback in the matter of marriage. A man who slept all day and all night was a man out of mischief, not likely to grumble nor to make love to his neighbour's wife; he would therefore be a model husband. When he fell asleep in the drawing-room in summer, his consort would sit beside him and brush away the flies; in winter she would be careful to cover him up lest he should catch cold; at mass she could prick him with a hat-pin to keep him awake; as for the rest, she would bear one of the oldest names in Europe, her husband would be a strictly religious and moral person, and she

would be very rich. What more could any woman ask? Evidently nothing, and Prince Chiaromonte therefore continued to negotiate the marriage in the old-fashioned manner, without the least intention of speaking about it to Angela till everything was altogether settled between the family lawyers, and the wedding could take place in six weeks. It was not the business of young people to fathom the intentions of their all-wise parents, and meanwhile Angela was free to go to parties with her aunt, and her intended husband was at liberty to sleep as much as he liked. The negotiations would probably occupy another two or three months, for the family lawyers had disagreed as to the number of times that Angela should be allowed to take the carriage out every day, and this had to be stipulated in the marriage contract, besides the number of dishes there were to be at luncheon and dinner and the question whether, if Angela took coffee after her meals, it should be charged to her husband, who took none, or against the income arising from her dowry. The family lawyers were both very old men and understood these difficult matters thoroughly, but neither would have felt that he was doing his duty to his client if he had not quarrelled with the other over each point. From week to week each reported progress to his employer, and on the whole the two fathers felt that matters were going on well, without any undue delay.

But the Fates frowned grimly on the marriage and on all things connected with it, for on the very morn-

ing during which Filmore Durand finished Angela's portrait, and before she had left his studio in the Palazzo Borghese, something happened which not only put a stop to the leisurely labours of the two lawyers, but which profoundly changed Angela's existence, and was the cause of her having a story quite different from that of a good many young girls who are in love with one man but are urged by their parents to marry another. The interest of this tale, if it has any, lies in no such simple conflict of forces as that, and it is enough to know that while her father had been busy over her marriage, Angela Chiaromonte had fallen in love with Giovanni Severi, and had, indeed, as much as promised to marry him; and that a good many people, including the Marchesa del Prato, already suspected this, though they had not communicated their suspicions to the girl's father, partly because he was not liked, and partly because he hardly ever showed himself in the world. The situation is thus clearly explained, so far as it was known to the persons concerned at the moment when the Great Unforeseen flashed from its hiding-place and hurled itself into their midst.

As Filmore Durand went with the Marchesa towards the entrance hall, followed by the young people, he called his man to open the outer door, but almost at the same moment he heard his voice at the telephone; the servant was a Swiss who spoke German, English, and Italian, and had followed the artist for many years. He was evidently answering an inquiry about the Marchesa just as he heard her step.

'The lady is here,' he said. 'She is coming to the telephone herself.'

He looked round as the four approached, for the instrument was placed on the right side of the large door that opened upon the landing.

'Some one for your ladyship,' he said in English, holding out the receiver to the Marchesa.

She took it and put it to her ear, repeating the usual Italian formula.

'Ready — with whom am I speaking? Yes. I am the Marchesa del Prato, she herself. What is it?'

There was a pause while she listened, and then Angela saw her face change suddenly.

'Dead?' she shrieked into the telephone. 'Half-an-hour ago?'

She still held the receiver to her ear, but she was stretching out her left hand as if she needed support. Durand took her by the arm and elbow, prepared to hold her up if she showed signs of fainting. Angela was already on her other side.

'Who is dead?' the girl asked quietly enough, but with evident anxiety.

'Your father,' answered the Marchesa, with such sudden and brutal directness that Giovanni started forward, and Durand stared in surprise, for he knew enough Italian to understand as much as that.

Angela made two steps backwards, slowly and mechanically, like a blind man who has unexpectedly run against a wall; like the blind, too, she held out her hands before her, as if to assure herself that she was

getting out of reach of the obstacle. Her face had turned white and her eyes were half closed.

The Marchesa no longer seemed to be in need of support and watched her.

'My poor child!' she cried, in a tone of conventional sympathy. 'I should have broken the news to you gradually ——'

'You should indeed!' answered Giovanni with stern emphasis.

He was already leading Angela to one of the nearest of the high-backed chairs that stood ranged against the dark-green wall of the hall. She sat down, steadying herself by his arm.

'Run over by a motor car almost at his own door,' said the Marchesa, in a lower tone and in English, as she turned slightly towards Durand. 'Killed on the spot! It is too awful! My poor brother-in-law!'

'Get some brandy and some cold water,' said the artist to his man, watching the girl's pale face and twitching hands.

'Yes,' said Giovanni, who was bending over her anxiously. 'Bring something quickly! She is going to faint.'

But Angela was not fainting, nor even half-unconscious. She had felt as if something hard had struck her between the eyes, without quite stunning her. She attempted to get up, but realised her weakness and waited a moment before trying again. Then she rose to her feet with an effort and stood straight and rigid before her aunt, her eyes quite open now.

'Come!' she said, almost imperiously, and in a voice unlike her own.

In a moment they were gone, and the artist was standing before the portrait he had finished, looking into its eyes as if it were alive. He had been deeply shocked by what had just happened, and was sincerely sorry for Angela, though he had not the least idea whether she had loved her father or not, but his face was calm and thoughtful again, now that she was gone, and expressed a quiet satisfaction which had not been there before. For it seemed to him that the picture was a precious reality, and that the young girl who had sat for it was only nature's copy, and not perfect at that; and perhaps the reality would not be taken from him, now, since Prince Chiaromonte had come to an untimely end; and the prospect of keeping the canvas was exceedingly pleasing to Filmore Durand. He had never painted anything that had disappointed him less, or that he was less willing to part with, and during the last day or two he had even thought of making a replica of it for the Prince in order to keep the original, for no copy, though it were made by himself most conscientiously, could ever be quite so good. But now that the Prince was dead, it was possible that the heirs, if there were any besides Angela, would be glad to be excused from paying a large sum for a picture they did not want. He was sure from the young girl's manner that she would no more care to possess a portrait of herself than a coloured postcard of the Colosseum or a plaster-cast of one of Canova's dancing-

girls. This was not flattering to the artist, it was true, but in the present case he would rather keep his own painting than have it appreciated ever so highly by any one else.

Late in the afternoon he stopped before the closed gateway of the Palazzo Chiaromonte and pushed the little postern that stood ajar. The big porter was within, standing dejectedly before the door of his lodge, and already dressed in the deep mourning which is kept in readiness in all the great Roman houses. The painter asked in broken Italian if the bad news was true, and the man nodded gravely, pointing to the gates. They would not be shut unless the master were dead. Durand asked after Donna Angela, but the porter was not communicative. She had come in with her aunt and both were upstairs; he suspected the painter of being a foreign newspaper correspondent and would say nothing more.

The American thanked him and went away; after all, he had come to make sure that the Prince was really dead, and he was conscious that his wish to keep the portrait was the only motive of his inquiry.

He strolled away through the crowded streets, blowing such clouds of cigarette smoke about him that people looked at him in surprise. It was almost sunset, in February, and it was just before Lent. Rome is at her gayest then, though the old Carnival is as dead and gone as Pio Nono, Garibaldi, the French military occupation, the hatred of the Jesuits, and all that made the revival of Italy in the nineteenth century

the most thrilling romance that ever roused Italian passion and stirred the world's sympathy. Durand was not old enough to remember those times, and he had never been in Rome at all till he was nearly thirty years of age and on the first wave of his high success; but he had read about the past, and to his unspoiled sight and vivid imagination Rome was still romantic and the greatest city in the world, ancient or modern; and somehow when he thought of his picture and of Angela's face, and remembered the scene at the telephone, he felt that he was himself just within the sphere of some mysterious and tragic action which he could not yet understand, but which might possibly affect his own life.

'This is a serio-comic world,' he said to himself as he slowly made his way down the Corso, watching the faces of the people he passed, because he never passed a face in the street without glancing at it, stopping now and then to look into a shop window where there was nothing to see that he had not seen a thousand times elsewhere, smoking cigarettes without number, thinking of Angela's portrait, and mechanically repeating his little epigram over and over again, to a sort of tune in his head, with variations and transpositions that meant nothing at all.

'This is a serio-comic world. This is a comico-serious world. This world is a serious comico-serial. This is a worldly-serious comedy.' And so forth, and so on; and a number of more or less good-looking women of the serio-comic world, whose portraits he had painted,

and several more or less distinguished men who had sat to him, passed the man of genius and greeted him as if they were rather pleased to show that they knew him; but they would have been shocked if they could have heard the silly words the great painter was mechanically repeating to himself as he idled along the pavement, musing on the picture he hoped to keep, and already regarded as his masterpiece and chief treasure.

CHAPTER II

THE excellent Madame Bernard had been Angela's governess before the child had been sent to the convent on the Trinità dei Monti, and whenever she was at home for the holidays, and also during the brief interval between her leaving school and going into society; and after that, during the winter which preceded Prince Chiaromonte's death, she had accompanied the motherless girl to concerts and had walked with her almost daily in the mornings. She was one of those thoroughly trustworthy, sound-minded, well-educated Frenchwomen of the middle class of whom many are to be found in the provinces, though the type is rare in Paris; nearly fifty years of age, she had lived twenty years in Rome, always occupying the same little apartment in a respectable street of Trastevere, where she had a spare room which she was glad to let to any French or English lady of small means who came to Rome for a few months in the winter and spring.

Angela sent her maid for Madame Bernard on the day of the catastrophe, since her aunt neither offered to take her in at once nor seemed inclined to suggest any arrangement for the future. The Marchesa did, indeed, take charge of everything in the Palazzo Chiaromonte within an hour of her brother-in-law's death; she locked the drawers of his private desk herself, sent

for the notary and had the customary seals placed on the doors of the inner apartments 'in the name of the heirs'; she spoke with the undertaker and made every arrangement for the customary lying in state of the body during the following night and day; saw to the erection of the temporary altar at which masses for the dead would be celebrated almost without interruption from midnight to noon by sixteen priests in succession; gave full instructions to the effect that the men-servants should take their turn of duty in regular watches, day and night, until the funeral; and finally left the palace, after showing herself to be an exceedingly practical woman.

When she went away, she was holding her handkerchief to her eyes with both hands and she forgot her parasol; but she remembered it as she was just going out by the postern, her carriage being outside because the gates were shut, and she sent her footman back for it and for the little morocco bag in which she carried her handkerchief and card-case. It was a small matter, but the porter, the footman, and the butler upstairs all remembered it afterwards, and the footman himself, while coming down, took the trouble to look into the little wallet, and saw that the card-case was there, but nothing else; for the Marchesa sometimes carried certain little cigarettes in it, which the man had found particularly good. But to-day there was not even one.

Madame Bernard arrived in tears, for she was a warm-hearted woman, and was overcome with sympathy for the lonely girl. She found Angela sitting by

a small fire in her own little morning-room on the upper floor. A tray with something to eat had been set beside her, she knew not by whom, but she had not tasted anything. Her eyes were dry, but her hands were burning and when she was conscious of feeling anything she knew that her head ached. She had forgotten that she had sent for the governess, and looked at her with a vaguely wondering expression as if she took the kindly Frenchwoman in black for a new shadow in her dream.

But presently mechanical consciousness returned, though without much definite sensation, and she let Madame Bernard have her way in everything, not making the slightest resistance or offering the smallest suggestion; she even submitted to being fed like a little child, with small mouthfuls of things that had no taste whatever for her.

By and by there was a dressmaker in the room, with an assistant, and servants brought a number of big bandboxes with lids covered with black oilcloth; and Angela's maid was there, too, and they tried one thing after another on her, ready-made garments for the first hours of mourning. Then they were gone, and she was dressed in black, and the room was filled with the unmistakable odour of black crape, which is not like anything else in the world.

Again time passed, and she was kneeling at a faldstool in the great hall downstairs; but a dark screen had been placed so that she could not be seen by any one who came in to kneel at the rail that divided the

upper part of the hall from the lower; and she saw nothing herself — nothing but a Knight of Malta, in his black cloak with the great white Maltese cross on his shoulder, lying asleep on his back; and on each side of him three enormous wax torches were burning in silver candlesticks taller than a tall man.

Quite at the end of the hall, five paces from the Knight's motionless head, three priests in black and silver vestments were kneeling before a black altar, reciting the Penitential Psalms in a quiet, monotonous voice, verse and verse, the one in the middle leading; and Angela automatically joined the two assistants in responding, but so low that they did not hear her.

The Knight bore a resemblance to her father, that was all. Perhaps it was only a waxen image she saw, or a wraith in that long dream of hers, of which she could not quite remember the beginning. She knew that she was nothing to the image, and that it was nothing to her. While her lips repeated the grand dirge of the King-poet in Saint Jerome's noble old Latin words, her thoughts followed broken threads, each cut short by a question that lacks an answer, by the riddle man has asked of the sky and the sea and the earth since the beginning: What does it mean?

What could it mean? The senseless facts were there, plain enough. That morning she had seen her father, she had kissed his hand in the old-fashioned way, and he had kissed her forehead, and they had exchanged a few words, as usual. She remembered that for the thousandth time she had wished that his

who had taken her father from her in an instant, or was it a blind force that had killed him, striking in the dark? If that was the answer, what was there left?

The sensitive girl shivered. Perhaps no bodily danger could have sent that chill through her. It began in her head and crept quickly to her hands and then to her feet, for it was not a fear of death that came upon her, nor of anything outward. To lose life was nothing, if there was heaven beyond; pain, torture, martyrdom would be nothing if God the good was standing on the other side. All life was but one long opportunity for sinning, and to lose it while in grace was to be safe for ever; so much she had been taught and until now she had believed it. But what loss could be compared with losing God? There were unbelievers in the world, of course, but she could not understand how they could still live on, and laugh, and seek pleasure and feel it keenly. What had they to fill the void of their tremendous loss? Surely, not to believe was not to hope, to be for ever without hope was the punishment of the damned, and to live hopeless in the world was to suffer the pains of hell on earth.

She felt them now. 'The pains of hell gat hold upon me,' she moaned, heedless of the priest's recitation. Darkness rose like a flood-tide all round her and she shut her eyes to keep it out, for her will fought for hope, as her body would have struggled against drowning. It was no longer a mere question that assailed her, but imminent destruction itself.

It passed away this first time and she grew calm

again. Not to believe was sin, and against all sin prayer and steadfast will must be availing. The will, she had; she could remember many prayers, too, and say them earnestly, and was thankful for her memory which held orisons in readiness for every circumstance of daily duty or spiritual life. From her childhood she had found a gentle delight in the Church's liturgies and hymns, and now, as she prayed with the forms of language she had always loved, habit brought back belief to lighten her darkness. She still felt the bitter cold of the outer night that was very near her; but she kept it off now, and warmed her poor little soul in the fervour of her praying till she felt that she was coming again to life and hope.

She opened her eyes at last and saw that nothing was changed. The Knight of Malta slept on, as he was to sleep for ever; the priests knelt motionless before the black altar; their quiet, monotonous voices went on with the Penitential Psalms as priests had said them for at least fifteen centuries. Angela listened till she caught the words and then began to respond again, and once more her thoughts followed broken threads.

Surely, by all she had been taught, her father was in heaven already. It was not possible that any human being should obey every written and unwritten ordinance of his religion more strictly than he had done ever since she could remember him. He had been severe, almost to cruelty, but he had been quite as unyieldingly austere in dealing with himself. He had fasted rigidly, not only when fasts were ordered, but of

his free will when others only abstained, he had never begun a day without hearing mass nor a week without confession and communion, he had retired into spiritual retreat in Lent, he had prayed early and late; in his dealings with men, he had not done to others what he would not have had them do to him, he had not said of his neighbour what he would not have said of himself, he had wronged no man, he had given much to charity and more to the 'imprisoned' head of the Church. He had so lived that no confessor could justly find fault with him, and he had never failed to pray for those in whom he discerned any shortcoming.

Who would condemn such a just person? Not God, surely. Therefore when his life had ended so suddenly that morning, his soul had been taken directly to heaven. If such righteousness as his had venial sins to expiate, what hope was there left for men of ordinary earthly passions and failings?

It was a consolation to think of that, Angela told herself, now that the tide of darkness had ebbed back to the depth of terror whence it had risen; and when at last the long dream slowly dissolved before returning reality the lonely girl's eyes overflowed with natural tears at the thought that her father's motionless lips would never move again, even to reprove her, and that she was looking for the last time on all that earth still held of him who had given her life.

CHAPTER III

THREE days later Angela sat alone in her morning-room, reading a letter from Giovanni Severi. All was over now — the lying in state, the funeral at the small parish church, the interment in the cemetery of San Lorenzo, where the late Prince had built a temporary tomb for himself and his family, under protest, because modern municipal regulations would not allow even such a personage as he to be buried within the walls, in his own family vault, at Santa Maria del Popolo. But he had been confident that even if he did not live to see the return of the Pope's temporal power, his remains would soon be solemnly transferred to the city, to rest with those of his fathers; and he had looked forward to his resurrection from a sepulchre better suited to his earthly rank and spiritual worth than a brick vault in a public cemetery, within a hundred yards of the thrice-anathematised crematorium, and of the unhallowed burial-ground set aside for Freemasons, anarchists, Protestants, and Jews. But no man can be blamed fairly for wishing to lie beside his forefathers, and if Prince Chiaromonte had failed to see that the destiny of Italy had outmeasured the worldly supremacy of the Vatican in the modern parallelogram of forces, that had certainly been a fault of judgment rather than of intention. He had never wavered in his fidelity to his ideal, nor had he ever

voluntarily submitted to any law imposed by the 'usurper.'

'That excellent Chiaromonte is so extremely clerical,' Pope Leo the Thirteenth had once observed to his secretary with his quiet smile.

But Angela missed her father constantly, not understanding that he had systematically forced her to look to him as the judge and master of her existence, and she wondered a little why she almost longed for his grave nod, and his stern frown of disapproval, and even for the daily and hourly reproof under which she had so often chafed. Madame Bernard had been installed in the palace since the day of the fatal accident, and she was kindness personified, full of consideration and forethought; yet the girl was very lonely and miserable from morning till night, and when she slept she dreamed of the dead Knight of Malta's face, of the yellow light of the wax torches, and the voices of the priests.

On the fourth day a letter came from Giovanni, the first she had ever received from him. She did not even know his handwriting, and she looked at the signature before reading the note to see who had written to her so soon. When she understood that it was he, a flood of sunshine broke upon her gloom. The bright morning sun had indeed been shining through the window for an hour, but she had not known it till then.

It was not a love-letter. He used those grammatically illogical but superfinely courteous forms which make high Italian a mystery to strangers who pick up a few hundred words for daily use and dream that they under-

stand the language. He used the first person for himself, but spoke of her in the third singular; he began with: 'Most gentle Donna Angela,' and he signed his full name at the end of a formal phrase setting forth his profoundly respectful homage. She would have been much surprised and perhaps offended if he had expressed himself in any more familiar way. Brought up as she had been under the most old-fashioned code in Europe when at home, and under the frigid rule of the Ladies of the Sacred Heart when she was at school, any familiarity of language seemed to her an outrage on good manners, and might even be counted a sin if she condescended to it in speaking with a man who was not yet her husband. She had been made to address her father in the third person feminine singular ever since she had learned to talk, precisely as Giovanni wrote to her; and if she prayed to the Deity with the less formal second person plural, this was doubtless because the Italian prayers had been framed in less refined and courteous times than her own.

In spite of his stiff grammar, however, Severi managed to write things that brought the colour to her face and the light to her eyes. He said, for instance, that he was coming to see her that very afternoon; that in order not to attract attention at the gate of the palace he would wear civilian's dress, and that he hoped she would not only receive him, but would send Madame Bernard out of the room for a little while, so that he might speak to her alone.

The proposal was so delightful and yet so disturbing

that Angela thought it must be wicked and tried to examine her conscience at once; but it shut up like an oyster taken out of the water and pretended to be perfectly insensible, turn it and probe it how she would.

So she gave it up; and she did so the more readily because it would be quite impossible to see Giovanni that afternoon, enchanting as the prospect would have been. Her aunt the Marchesa had sent word that she was coming at four o'clock with the lawyer to explain Angela's position to her, and it was impossible to say how long the two might stay. Meanwhile she must send word to Giovanni not to come, for it would not suffice that he should be refused admittance at the gate, since he might chance to present himself just when the Marchesa drove up, which would produce a very bad impression. Angela was ashamed to send her maid with a note to a young officer, and she would not trust one of the men-servants; she turned for advice to Madame Bernard, who was her only confidante.

'What am I to do?' she asked when she had explained everything. 'He is generally at the War Office at this time and he may not even go home before he comes here. I see no way but to send a note.'

'He would certainly go home to change his clothes,' answered the practical Frenchwoman; 'but it is not necessary for you to write. I will telephone to the War Office, and if the Count is there I will explain everything.'

Angela looked at her doubtfully.

'But then the servant who telephones will know,' she objected.

'The servant? Why? I do not understand. I shall speak myself. No one will be there to hear.'

'Yourself? My father never could, and I never was shown how to do it. Are you sure you understand the thing? It is very complicated, I believe.'

Madame Bernard was not surprised, for she knew the ways of the Palazzo Chiaromonte; but she smiled and assured the young girl that a telephone was not really such a dangerous instrument as she had been led to believe.

'I once tried to make a few stitches with a sewing-machine,' Angela said, apparently in explanation.

'A telephone is different,' Madame Bernard answered gravely. 'Shall I ask the Count to come to-morrow at four o'clock, instead of to-day?'

Angela hesitated, and then blushed faintly.

'Do you think ——' she began, but she stopped and hesitated. 'He would be angry, I am sure ——' She seemed to be suddenly distressed.

'Your father?' asked the Frenchwoman, guessing what she meant. 'My dear Princess ——'

'Oh, please don't call me that!' cried Angela. 'You never do ——'

'You see, you are a great personage now, my dear child,' Madame Bernard answered, 'and I am no longer your governess ——'

'But you are my friend, dear, dear Madame Bernard! Indeed, I think you are my only friend now!'

And thereupon Angela threw her arms round the little woman's neck and kissed her very affectionately. Madame Bernard's fresh face beamed with pleasure.

'Thank you, my dear,' she answered. 'And as for your father, my child, he is without doubt in heaven; and that means that he now judges you by your intentions and no longer by appearances only.'

This sage little speech reassured Angela, though she soon afterwards asked herself whether it was quite loyal to allow any one to say that the Prince had ever judged her 'by appearances only.' But while she was making this reflection Madame Bernard was already telephoning to Giovanni, who was at the War Office, as Angela supposed, and he answered with alacrity that he would come to the palace on the following afternoon and ask to see Madame Bernard on a matter of business. It was really her business to teach French, as all the servants knew, and if they thought that the young officer came to ask about some lessons for himself or a friend, so much the better. Madame Bernard was naturally practical, and Giovanni was by nature quick-witted; so the matter was settled in a few words, to the satisfaction of both; and when Angela was merely told that he was coming she was much more pleased than she was willing to show, and she said no more about her father's hypothetical disapproval.

That afternoon she received the Marchesa del Prato and the lawyer downstairs in the second of the outer drawing-rooms. It was cold there, but she had not quite dared to order a fire to be made, because the Prince had never allowed fires except in the inner rooms, which were still closed under the notarial seals. The place had a certain grandeur of its own, for the massive decorations,

the heavy furniture, and the rich brocade curtains all dated from the best period of Louis the Fourteenth's reign. On the walls there were four or five first-rate pictures, the largest of which was a magnificent portrait of a former Chiaromonte by Vandyke; there was a Holy Family by Guercino, another by Bonifacio, a Magdalen with the box of ointment, by Andrea del Sarto, and one or two smaller paintings of no inconsiderable value.

But at that hour the light was bad, for the afternoon had turned cold and rainy after a beautiful morning, and at four o'clock it was still too early to have lamps. A few moments after the hour, a servant opened the door, held the curtains aside, and announced the visitor.

'Her Excellency, the Princess Chiaromonte!'

Angela started slightly at the name. The last Princess Chiaromonte who had passed through that doorway had been her mother, and in her solitude the girl had not even been told that her uncle had already assumed the title of the head of the house. The lacquey paid no attention whatever to the quiet man in black who followed the Princess, holding his hat against his chest with both hands and advancing with a bowing motion at every step, as if he were saluting the family chairs as he passed them. Angela vaguely remembered his solemnly obsequious face.

Her aunt seemed to have grown taller and larger, as she bent to imprint a formal kiss on the girl's cheek, and then sat down in one of the huge old easy-chairs, while the lawyer seated himself at a respectful distance

on an ottoman stool with his high hat on his knees. Angela took her place at one end of the stiff sofa that stood directly under the Vandyke portrait, and she waited for her aunt to speak.

The Princess had evidently prepared herself, for she spoke clearly and did not pause for some time.

'Your uncle has a slight attack of influenza,' she said; 'otherwise he would have come with me, and I should have been more than glad if he himself could have explained the whole situation to you instead of leaving that painful duty to me. You are well aware, my dear Angela, that your father always clung to the most prejudiced traditions of the intransigent clericals, and could never be induced to conform to any of the new regulations introduced by the Italian Government. In point of fact, I do not think he quite realised that the old order had passed away when he was a mere boy, and that the new was to be permanent, if not everlasting. If he had, he would have acted very differently, I am sure, and my present duty would have been much easier than it is. Are you quite certain that you understand that?'

Angela was quite certain that she did, and nodded quietly, though she could not see how her father's political convictions could affect her own present situation.

'I have no doubt,' continued the Princess, 'that he brought you up to consider yourself the heiress of all his fortune, though not of the title, which naturally goes to the eldest male heir. Am I right?'

'He never told me anything about my inheritance,' Angela replied.

'So much the better. It will be easier for me to explain your rather unusual position. In the first place, I must make it clear to you that your father and mother declined to go before the mayor at the Capitol when they were married, in spite of the regulations which had then been in force a number of years. They were devout Catholics and the blessing of the Church was enough for them. According to your father, to go through any form of civil ceremony, before or after the wedding, was equivalent to doubting the validity of the sacrament of marriage.'

'Naturally,' Angela assented, as her aunt paused and looked at her.

'Very naturally.' The Princess's eyes began to glitter oddly, and the lawyer turned his hat uneasily on his knees. 'Very naturally, indeed! Unfortunately for you, however, your father was not merely overlooking a municipal regulation, as he supposed; he was deliberately bidding defiance to the laws of Italy.'

'What do you mean?' asked Angela rather nervously.

'It is very painful to explain,' answered the elder woman with gleaming eyes and a disagreeable smile. 'The simple truth is that as your father and mother were not civilly married — civilly, you understand — they were not legally married at all, and the law will never admit that they were!'

Angela's hand tightened on the arm of the old sofa.

'Not married?' she cried. 'My father and mother not married? It is impossible, it is monstrous——'

'Not "legally" married, I said,' replied the Princess. 'To be legally married, it is absolutely necessary to go before the mayor at the Capitol and have the civil ceremony properly performed. Am I right?' she asked, turning suddenly to the lawyer. 'It is absolutely necessary, is it not?'

'Absolutely, Excellency,' the legal adviser answered. 'Otherwise the children of the marriage are not legitimate.'

'What does that mean?' asked Angela in a frightened tone.

'It means,' explained the Princess, 'that in the eyes of the law you do not exist——'

Angela tried to laugh.

'But I do exist! Here I am, Angela Chiaromonte, to say that I am alive!'

'Angela, but not Chiaromonte,' corrected the Princess, hardly able to hide her satisfaction. 'I am sorry to say that your dear father would not even submit to the regulation which requires all parents alike to declare the birth of children, and he paid a heavy fine for his refusal. The consequence is that when your birth was entered at the Municipality, you were put down as a foundling child whose parents refused to declare themselves.'

'A foundling! I, a foundling!' Angela half rose in amazed indignation, but almost instantly sat down again, with an incredulous smile. 'Either you are quite

mad,' she said, 'or you are trying to frighten me for some reason I do not understand.'

The Princess raised her sandy eyebrows and looked at the lawyer, evidently meaning him to speak for her.

'That is your position, Signorina,' he said calmly. 'You have, unhappily, no legal status, no legal name, and no claim whatever on the estate of His Excellency Prince Chiaromonte, who was not married to your mother in the eyes of the law, and refused even to acknowledge you as his child by registering your birth at the mayoralty. Every inquiry has been made on your behalf, and I have here the certified copy of the register as it stands, declaring you to be a foundling. It was still in your father's power to make a will in your favour, Signorina, and as the laws of entail no longer exist, His Excellency may have left you his whole estate, real and personal, though his titles and dignities will in any case pass to his brother. I must warn you, however, that such a will might not prove valid in law, since His Excellency did not even legally acknowledge you as his child. So far, no trace of a will has been found with his late Excellency's notary, nor with his lawyer, nor deposited with his securities at his banker's. It is barely possible that some paper may exist in the rooms which are still closed, but I think it my duty to tell you that I do not expect to find anything of the kind when we break the seals to-morrow, in the presence of the heirs and witnesses.'

He ceased speaking and looked at the Princess as if asking whether he should say more, for Angela had bent

her head and quietly covered her eyes with one hand, and in this attitude she sat quite motionless in her place. The lawyer thought she was going to burst into tears, for he did not know her.

'That will do, Calvi,' said the Princess calmly. 'You have made it all very clear, and you may retire for the present. The young lady is naturally overcome by the bad news, and would rather be alone with me for a little while, I daresay.'

Signor Calvi rose, made a profound obeisance to the Princess, scarcely bent his head to Angela, and retired, apparently bowing to the family chairs as he passed each. The young girl dropped her hand and looked after him with a sort of dull curiosity; she was the last person in the world to take offence or to suppose that anyone meant to be rude to her, but it was impossible not to notice the lawyer's behaviour. In his opinion she was suddenly nobody, and deserved no more notice than a shop-girl. She understood enough of human nature to be sure that he counted on the Princess's approval.

The elder woman was watching her with a satisfaction she hardly tried to conceal. Her small hands were encased in marvellously fitting black gloves, though black gloves rarely fit so well as others, and were crossed on her knee over the little leather bag she always carried. She was leaning back in the great arm-chair, and the mourning she wore made her faultless complexion look even more brilliant than it was. No one knew how near forty the Princess might be, for she appeared in the *Almanach de Gotha* without a birthday, and only the

date of her marriage was given; but the year was 1884, and people said it was impossible that she should have been less than seventeen when her parents had brought her to Rome and had tried to marry her to the elder of the Chiaromonte family; as twenty years had passed since they had succeeded in capturing the second son for their daughter, it was clear that she could not be under thirty-seven. But her complexion was extraordinary, and though she was a tall woman she had preserved the figure and grace of a young girl.

Angela did not look directly at her enemy for some seconds after the lawyer had left the room, closing the door behind him, not loudly but quite audibly; but she was the first to speak when she was sure that he was out of hearing.

'You hate me,' she said at last. 'What have I done to you?'

The Princess was not timid, nor very easily surprised, but the question was so direct that she drew further back into her chair with a quick movement, and her bright eye sparkled angrily as she raised her sandy eyebrows.

'In this world,' she said, 'the truth is always surprising and generally unpleasant. In consideration of what I have been obliged to tell you about yourself, I can easily excuse your foolish speech.'

'You are very kind,' Angela answered quietly enough, but in a tone that the Princess did not like. 'I was not asking your indulgence, but an explanation, no matter how disagreeable the rest of the truth may be. What have I done that you should hate me?'

The Princess laughed contemptuously.

'The expression is too strong,' she retorted. 'Hatred would imply an interest in you and your possible doings, which I am far from feeling, I assure you! Since it turns out that you are not even one of the family ——'

She laughed again and raised her eyebrows still higher, instead of ending the speech.

'From what you say,' Angela answered with a good deal of dignity, 'I can only understand that if you followed your own inclination you would turn me out into the street.'

'The law will do so without my intervention,' answered the elder woman. 'If my brother-in-law had even taken the trouble to acknowledge you as his child, without legitimising you, you would have been entitled to a small allowance, perhaps two or three hundred francs a month, to keep you from starving. But as he has left no legal proof that you are his daughter, and since he was not properly married to your mother, you can claim nothing, not even a name! You are, in fact, a destitute foundling, as Calvi just said!'

'It only remains for you to offer me your charity,' Angela said.

'That was not my intention,' returned the Princess with a savage sneer. 'I have talked it over with my husband, and we do not see why he should be expected to support his brother's — natural child!'

Angela rose from her seat without a word and went quietly towards the door: but before she could reach it the Princess had followed her with a rush and a dramatic

sweep of her black cloth skirt and plentiful crape, and had caught her by the wrist to bring her back to the middle of the great room.

'I shall not keep you long!' cried the angry woman. 'You ask me what you have done that I should hate you, and I answer, nothing, since you are nobody! But I hated your mother, because she robbed me of the man I wanted, of the only man I ever loved — your father — and when I married his brother I swore that she should pay me for that, and she has! If she can see you as you are to-day, all heaven cannot dry her tears, for all heaven itself cannot give you a name, since the one on her own tombstone is not hers by any right. I hope she sees you! Oh, I hope it was not for nothing that she fasted till she fainted, and prayed till she was hoarse, and knelt in damp churches till she died of it! I hope she has starved and whined her way to paradise and is looking down at this very moment and can see her daughter turned out of my house, a pauper foundling, to beg her bread! I hope you are in a state of grace, as she is, and that the communion of saints brings you near enough together for her to see you!'

'You are mad,' Angela said when the Princess paused for breath. 'You do not know what you are saying. Let go of my wrist and try to get back to your senses!'

Whether the Princess was really out of her mind, as seemed at least possible, or was only in one of her frequent fits of rage, the words had an instantaneous effect. She dropped Angela's wrist, drew herself up, and recovered her self-control in a few seconds. But there was still a

dangerous glare in her cat-like eyes as she turned towards the window and faced the dull yellowish light of the late afternoon.

'You will soon find out that I have not exaggerated,' she said, dropping from her late tone of fury to a note of icy coldness. 'The seals will be removed to-morrow at noon, and I suppose no one can prevent you from being present if you choose. After that you will make such arrangements for your own future as you see fit. I should recommend you to apply to one of the two convents on which my brother-in-law lavished nearly three millions of francs during his life. One or the other of them will certainly take you in without a dowry, and you will have at least a decent roof over your head.'

With this practical advice the Princess Chiaromonte swept from the room and Angela was left alone to ask herself whether such a sudden calamity as hers had ever before overtaken an innocent girl in her Roman world. She went back very slowly to the sofa and sat down again under the great Vandyke portrait; her eyes wandered from one object to another, as if she wished to make an inventory of the things that had seemed to be hers because they had been her father's, but she was far too completely dazed by what had happened to think very connectedly. Besides, though she did not dare let the thought give her courage, she still had a secret conviction that it was all a mistake and that her father must have left some document which would be found among his papers the next day, and would clear away all this dreadful misunderstanding.

As for the rest of her aunt's story, no one had ever hinted at such a thing in her hearing, but Madame Bernard would know the truth. There was little indeed which the excellent Frenchwoman did not know about the old Roman families, after having lived among them and taught their children French for nearly a quarter of a century. She was very discreet and might not wish to say much, but she certainly knew the truth in this case.

It was not till she was upstairs in her own room, and was trying to repeat to her old governess just what had been said, that Angela began to realise what it meant. Madame Bernard was by turns horrified, righteously angry, and moved to profound pity; at first she could not believe her ears, but when she did she invoked the divine wrath on the inhuman monster who had the presumption to call herself a woman, a mother, and an aunt; finally, she folded Angela in a motherly embrace and burst into tears, promising to protect her at the risk of her own life — a promise she would really have kept if the girl had been in bodily danger.

In her secret heart the little Frenchwoman was also making some reflections on the folly and obstinacy of the late Prince, but out of sheer kindness and tact she kept them to herself for the present. Meanwhile she said she would go and consult one of the great legal lights, to whose daughters she had lately given lessons and who had always been very kind to her. It was nonsense, she said, to believe that the Prince's brother could turn Angela out of her home without making provision for

her, such a liberal provision as would be considered a handsome dowry — four hundred thousand francs would be the very least. The Commendatore was a judge in the Court of Appeals and knew everything. He would not even need to consult his books! His brain was an encyclopædia of the law! She would go to him at once.

But Angela shook her head as she sat looking at the small wood fire in the old-fashioned red-brick fireplace. Now that she had told her story she saw how very sure the Princess and the lawyer must have been to speak as they had both spoken.

But Madame Bernard put on her hat and went out to see the judge, who was generally at home late in the afternoon; and Angela sat alone in the dusk for a while, poking her little fire with a pair of very rusty wrought-iron tongs, at least three hundred years old, which would have delighted a collector but which were so heavy and clumsy that they hurt her hands.

Her aunt's piece of advice came back to her; she had better ask to be taken in at one of the convents which her father had enriched and where she would be received without a dowry. She knew them both, and both were communities of cloistered nuns; the one was established in a gloomy mediæval fortress in the heart of the city, built round a little garden that looked as unhealthy as the old Prioress's own muddy-complexioned face and stubbly chin; the other was shut up in a hideous modern building that had no garden at all. She felt nothing but a repugnance that approached

horror when she thought of either, though she tried to reprove herself for it because her father had given so much money to the sisters, and had always spoken of them to her as 'holy women.' No doubt they were; doubtless, too, Saint Anthony of Thebes had been a holy man, though it would have been unpleasant to share his cell, or even his meals. Angela felt that if she was to live on bread, water, and salad, she might as well have liberty with her dinner of herbs. It was heartless to think of marrying, no doubt, when her father had not yet been dead a week, but since she was forced to take the future into consideration, she felt sure that Giovanni would marry her without a penny, and that she should be perfectly happy with him. She could well afford to laugh at the Princess's advice so long as Giovanni was alive. He was coming to see her to-morrow, she would tell him everything, and when the year of her mourning expired they would be married.

The question was, what she was to do in the meantime, since it was quite clear that she must soon leave the home in which she had been brought up. Like all people who have never been face to face with want, or any state of life even distinctly resembling poverty, she had a vague idea that something would be provided for her. It was not till she tried to define what that something was to be that she felt a little sinking at her heart; but the cheering belief soon returned, that the whole affair was a mistake, unless it was a pure invention of her aunt's, meant to frighten her into

abandoning her rights. In a little while Madame Bernard would come back, beaming with satisfaction, with a message from the learned judge to say that such injustice and robbery were not possible under modern enlightened laws; and Angela smiled to think that she could have been so badly frightened by a mad woman and an obsequious old lawyer.

Decidedly, in spite of her gift for remembering prayers and litanies, the mere thought of a cloistered life repelled her. Like most very religiously brought up girls she had more than once fancied that she was going to have a 'vocation' for the veil; but a sensible confessor had put that out of her head, discerning at once in her mental state those touches of maiden melancholy which change the look of the young life for a day or a week, as the shadow of a passing cloud saddens a sunlit landscape. It was characteristic of Angela that the possibility of becoming a nun as a refuge from present and future trouble did not present itself to her seriously, now that trouble was really imminent. She was too buoyant by nature, her disposition was too even and sensible, and above all, she was too courageous to think of yielding tamely to the fate her aunt wished to impose upon her.

It might have been expected that she should at least break down for a little while that afternoon and have a good cry in her solitude, while Madame Bernard was on her errand to the judge; but she did not, though there was a moment when she felt that tears were not far off. By way of keeping them back she went into

her bedroom, lit a candle and knelt down to recite the prayers she had selected to say daily for her father. They were many, some of them were beautiful, and more than half of them were centuries old. Her conviction that the very just man was certainly in heaven already did not make it seem wholly useless to pray for him. No one could be quite sure of what happened in paradise, and in any case, if he was in no need of such intercession himself, she was allowed to hope that grace might overflow and avail to help some poor soul in purgatory, by means of the divine indulgence.

Madame Bernard came back at last, but there was consternation in her kindly face, for the great legal light had confirmed every word the Princess and her lawyer had said to Angela, and had shrugged his shoulders at the suggestion that a will might still be found. He had told the governess plainly that a man married to a woman only by a religious ceremony was not legally her husband, and that his children had neither name nor rights unless he went through the legal form of recognising them before the proper authorities. If the parents died without making a will, the children had no claim whatever on the estate unless they had been properly recognised. If there was a will, however, they might inherit, even if they had not been legitimised, provided that no lawful heirs of the testators were living, ascendants or descendants. The Commendatore had expressed great surprise that the late Prince should not have been warned of his daughter's irregular position by his legal advisers. It only showed, he said,

how necessary the law was, since people who disregarded it got into such terrible trouble.

The French teacher instinctively felt that there was something wrong with the final syllogism, but it was only too clear that the Commendatore knew his business, and that unless a legally executed will were found on the morrow Angela had not the smallest chance of getting a penny from the great estate her father had left.

'If they are so inhuman as to turn you out of your home without providing for you,' Madame Bernard said, with tears in her eyes, 'I do not see what you are to do, my dear child. I am ashamed to offer you the little spare room I sometimes let to single foreign ladies — and yet — if you would take it — ah, you would be so welcome! It is not a bad exposure — it has the sun on it all day, though there is only one window. The carpet is getting a little threadbare, but the curtains are new and match the furniture — a pretty flowered chintz, you know. And I will make little dishes for you, since you have no appetite! A "navarin," my dear, I make it well, and a real "fricassée"! We Frenchwomen can all cook! The "navarin" was my poor husband's predilection — when he had eaten one made by me, he used to say that the fleshpots of Egypt were certainly the "navarin" and nothing else. But when I am alone it is not worth while to take so much trouble. An egg, five sous' worth of ham and brawn, and a roll — that suffices me when I am alone! But if you will accept the little room — ah, then I will put

on an apron and go into the kitchen, and you shall taste the French cookery of a Frenchwoman!'

Angela was not listening to all this, for she was too much touched by the generous intention to hear half of what Madame Bernard said, and she could only press the little governess's hand again while she tried to edge in a word of thanks between the quick sentences.

'And as for the rest,' Madame Bernard ran on, 'I have chaperoned half the young girls in Roman society to concerts and to the dentist's, and I have a nice little sitting-room, and there is no reason in the world why Count Severi should not come to see us, until you can be married!'

This, at least, did not escape Angela, who squeezed the small plump hand very hard, and at last succeeded in speaking herself.

'You are too good!' she cried. 'Too kind! If it turns out to be true, if I am really to be a beggar, I would rather beg of you than of distant cousins and people I know! Besides, they are all so afraid of my aunt's tongue that not one of them would dare to take me in, even for a week! But I will not come unless you will let me work to help you, in some way — I do not know how — is there nothing I know well enough to teach?'

'Oh, la, la!' cried Madame Bernard. 'Will you please not say such things, my dear! As if it were not the greatest happiness in the world you will be giving me, a lonely old woman, to come and live with me, and help me take care of the parrot and water the

flowers in the window every evening at sunset, and learn how to make a "navarin!" Work? Oh yes! You shall work, my dear child! If you think it is easy to please a parrot, try it! I only say that!'

'I will do my best,' Angela said, smiling. 'To-morrow, at this hour, we shall know what is to happen.'

'What has happened, has happened,' said Madame Bernard, as calmly as any Hindu, though she was not a fatalist. 'Even if there is a paper somewhere, do you think the Marchesa will not be the first to find it and tear it to a thousand bits? No, I will not call her "Princess Chiaromonte"! I, who knew your mother, my dear! Trust me, if there is a will in the sealed rooms, the Marchesa will discover it before any one!'

Angela thought that this might be true, for she had a most vivid recollection of her aunt's look and voice during the late interview. The more she thought of the immediate future, the clearer it became to her that she must accept her old governess's offer of shelter for the present. She could not bring herself to beg a lodging and the bare necessaries of life from any of those people whom she had called her friends. There were at least half-a-dozen girls with whom she had been intimate at the Sacred Heart, and during the past winter, and some of them were connections of her father's and would be profoundly shocked to learn what her position now was. No doubt their parents would take her in for a few days, and would very possibly do more than that, and formally protest to her aunt and uncle against the treatment she had received.

But could she stay with any of them longer than a week on such a footing? Would she be anything better than a waif, not knowing where she should sleep or get a meal a few days hence? No; her only choice lay between accepting Madame Bernard's offer, and presenting herself as a candidate for charity at one of the two convents her father had protected. Afterwards, a year hence or more, when she should be married to Giovanni Severi, she would find some means of amply repaying the generous woman, without hurting her feelings. Until then, she must accept the kindness and be thankful that it came from such a true friend.

She had no intention of showing herself downstairs the next day, when the seals were to be removed and the papers examined. If she had cherished any illusion as to the existence of a document in her favour, Madame Bernard's last speech had effectually destroyed it, which was the best thing that could have happened. At least, she was sure of Giovanni, and a year must pass in a year's time! That was axiomatic, and when the twelve months were over she would be married quietly. She would not bring him a handsome dowry as she had fully expected to do, and though his father was well-off, there were other children, so that she could not expect to be rich; but what difference could that make to two young people who loved each other? Evidently, none at all.

It rained all the morning and Angela spent most of the time in a sort of apathy, so far as her companion could see, sitting still for an hour with a book she did

not read, then moving about to rooms in an objectless way only to go back to her chair in a few minutes and to sit motionless again before the smouldering wood fire.

Madame Bernard, on the contrary, was very busy in making preparations to take her away if a sudden move should be necessary. Though the servants were evidently informed of what was taking place, she succeeded in getting a couple of trunks and a valise brought up, and she began to pack them with clothing from Angela's wardrobe, taking only such things as would be useful in the quiet life of mourning the girl was to lead for a year. The maid had disappeared, presumably to look for a place, and when it was time for luncheon it was not without difficulty that Madame Bernard got a footman to bring something cold on a tray. It was quite clear by this time that the whole household knew the truth and expected Angela to leave the palace that day, and the little woman paused more than once in her packing to shake her fist at the slim visions of the Princess Chiaromonte that crossed the field of her imagination.

Downstairs matters proceeded as she had foreseen. The Princess, two lawyers, a notary, and several clerks had removed the seals and locked themselves in the inner apartment to examine the papers and such valuables as were there; but it is needless to say that they found nothing in the nature of a will, nor any document even expressing a wish on the part of the deceased. The notary observed that it was very strange, but one of the lawyers shrugged his shoulders and

smiled, while the other asked why, in the nature of things, a man so young and healthy as the late Prince should have been expected to make careful preparations against his sudden demise when he might well expect to live thirty years longer. The Princess said nothing, and her husband did not appear; indeed, he never did, and on all occasions of importance, like the present, the Princess was provided with a power of attorney to represent him, speak for him, decide for him, and sign documents for him. There were many stories about him in society, none of which contained more than the merest particle of truth. Some people said he was mad, others maintained that he was paralysed; there were those who confidently asserted that his face was disfigured by an unsightly claret mark, and it was even suggested that he was a leper. When any of these tales were repeated to his wife by dear friends, she answered that he was very well and had just gone to the Abruzzi to look after one of the large holdings of the estate, or that he was in Hungary, shooting with distant cousins who had lands there, or that, if the truth must be known, he had a touch of the influenza and would probably run down to Sicily for a change, as soon as he was able to travel. Angela herself had not seen him since she had been a mere child. She remembered that once, when she was at her aunt's, a tall, pale man with a thoughtful face had passed through the room quickly without paying the least attention to any one; she had asked her small cousins who he was, and had been told in an awe-

struck whisper that it was their father. That was probably the only time she had ever laid eyes on him; and somehow she did not connect him with what was happening to her now. It was all her aunt's doing; the thin and thoughtful man had not looked as if he were heartless, he would not have allowed his brother's child to be turned out a beggar, under the letter of the law.

Yet the Princess's most intimate and affectionate enemies had not succeeded in fathoming the mystery. Two of them, who were connections of her husband's, had once had a theory that she had locked him up and kept him a prisoner for her own ends; a similar case had then recently occurred in Palermo, where a widowed lady and her daughter had been kept in confinement during several years, and almost starved to death, by the wicked steward of their estates. Accordingly, the aforesaid connections had appealed to the chief of secret police for information about their relative; but in a few days he had been able to tell them confidently that the Marchese del Prato was in good health and quite free, that he was an enthusiastic scholar, and was writing an exhaustive work on the mythology of Pindar's *Odes*, and that there was no cause for any anxiety about him. So that matter was settled for ever.

At half-past three o'clock the Princess went away, leaving the lawyers and clerks to finish their work, for she was more than satisfied that no will nor any similar document would be found amongst the late Prince's papers, and everything else was mere formality; the

regular inventories would be made later when the succession duties had to be paid, but meanwhile there was nothing to hinder her from taking possession in her husband's name. Before leaving the palace she sent for the butler, and told him that 'Signorina Angela' was to be requested to 'remove her effects' the next day. She further condescended to inform him that the 'Signorina' had been ascertained to be a nameless foundling who had no share in the inheritance and must shift for herself, as it was not the intention of the Prince to support such a person. The butler had learned something of the great Roman families during a brilliant career in the servants' hall, and he could have told some singularly romantic tales, but he had never had experience of anything like this. He tried to look at the Princess for a moment before he answered her, but he could not face her glittering eyes.

'Very well, Excellency,' he said, bowing. 'Is the young lady to have her meals here till she leaves? The French governess is also staying in the house.'

'Send them up something from the servants' dinner,' the Princess answered.

'Very well, Excellency.'

But the butler looked after her with considerable curiosity, watching her graceful figure as she went down the grand staircase and holding the swinging door open on the landing till she was out of sight. Then he went in again, looked round the empty hall, and spoke aloud, asking a question that has never had any answer.

'Women, women — who can understand you?'

CHAPTER IV

HALF-AN-HOUR later Giovanni Severi entered the gate below in civilian's dress and asked if he could see Madame Bernard, the French teacher, who had let him know that she was stopping in the palace. The porter told him to ring at the right-hand door on the second landing, but added that it was doubtful whether any one would let him in, as there was 'confusion in the house.'

Madame Bernard was waiting for him, however; he had arrived punctually and she let him in herself.

'Have you heard, Monsieur?' she asked, before he could speak. 'Do you know what is happening?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'All Rome knows it by this time, for the story was in the morning papers. May I see Donna Angela?'

'Come, Monsieur.'

She had fastened the outer door while he was speaking, and she now led the way without any more words.

Angela knew Giovanni's step at a distance, and when he entered she was standing in the middle of the room. He had never before seen her in black, and she was paler than usual; he looked anxiously into her face as he took her hand, and she, meeting his eyes expectantly, saw a change in them. Neither Angela nor Severi spoke at first, and in the silence Madame

Bernard passed them and went into the next room, shutting the door after her.

'Have you heard?' Angela asked, still standing and still holding Giovanni's hand.

'Yes. It is in all the papers to-day. There is an outcry. If your aunt shows herself in the streets she will be hissed. But she has the law on her side. I have been to two lawyers to inquire.'

He spoke in short sentences, nervously, and when he stopped he bit his moustache.

'There is something else,' Angela answered. 'I see it in your eyes. There is something I do not know, some still worse news. Sit down there by the fire opposite me and tell me everything, for I am not afraid. Nothing can frighten me now.'

She seated herself where she had sat more than half the day, and he took the chair to which she had pointed. She poked the small green logs with the antiquated tongs and watched the sparks that flew upwards with every touch while she waited for him to speak. But he looked at her in silence, forgetting everything for a while except that he was really alone with her, almost for the first time in his life. He changed his position and bent forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands together, so that he was nearer to her. Without turning her face from the fire she saw him in a side-glance, but made no answering motion.

'Tell me what it is,' she said softly. 'Only one thing could hurt me now.'

'It is hard to tell,' he answered in rather a dull voice.

She misunderstood, and turned to him slowly with wondering and frightened eyes. Her hand weakened, without quite losing its hold, and the ends of the clumsy tongs clattered on the brick hearth. The doubt that had sprung upon her like a living thing as soon as she saw him, began to dig its claws into her heart.

'If it is so hard to tell,' she said, 'it must be that one thing.' She turned resolutely to the fire again. 'If it is to be good-bye, please go away quietly and leave me alone.'

The words were not all spoken before he had caught her arm, so suddenly that the old tongs fell on the bricks with a clang. Like him, she had been leaning forward in her low chair, and as he drew her to him she involuntarily slipped from her seat and found herself kneeling on one knee beside him. She gave a little cry, more of surprise than of displeasure or timidity, but he did not heed her. It was the first time they had ever been left alone together, and while he still held her with his right hand his left stole round her neck, to bring her face nearer.

But she resisted him almost fiercely; she set both her hands against his chest and pushed herself from him with all her might, and the red blush rose even to her forehead at the thought of the kiss she almost saw on his lips, a kiss that hers had never felt. He meant nothing against her will, and when he felt that she was matching her girl's strength against his, as if she feared him, his arms relaxed and he let her go. She sprang to her feet like a young animal released, and leaned against

the mantelpiece breathing hard, and fixing her burning eyes on the old engraving of Saint Ursula, asleep in a queer four-post bedstead with her crown at her feet, that hung over the fireplace. But instead of rising to stand beside her, Giovanni leaned back in his chair, his hands crossed over one knee; and instead of looking up to her face, he gazed steadily down at the hem of her long black skirt, where it lay motionless across the wolf's skin that served for a hearth-rug.

'What is it?' she asked, after a long pause, and rather unsteadily.

He understood that she was going back to the question she had asked him at first, but still he did not answer. She kept her eyes steadily on Saint Ursula while she spoke again.

'If it is not good-bye, what is it that is so hard to say?'

'I have had a long talk with my father.'

Angela moved a little and looked down at his bent head, for he spoke in an almost despairing tone. She thought she understood him at last.

'He will not hear of our marriage, now that I am a beggar,' she said, prompting him.

But Giovanni raised his face at once, and rather proudly.

'You are unjust to him,' he said. 'He is not changed. It is a very different matter. He has had a great misfortune, and has lost almost all he had, without much hope of recovering anything. We were very well off, and I should have had a right to marry you, though

you had not a penny, if this had not happened. As it is, my father is left with nothing but his General's pension to support my mother. My brothers will both need help for years to come, for they are much younger than I am, and I must live on my pay if I mean to stay in the service.'

'Is that all?' Angela's voice trembled a little.

'Yes, my pay, and nothing more ——'

'I did not mean that,' she hastened to say, interrupting him, and there was a note of returning gladness in her voice. 'I meant to ask if that was all the bad news.'

'It is enough, surely, since it half ruins our lives! What right have I to ask you to keep your promise and marry me, since I have not enough for us to live on?'

Angela turned quite towards him now and repeated his own words.

'And what right have I to ask you to keep your promise and marry me? When you gave your word, you thought I had a great name and was heir to a splendid fortune. You were deceived. I am a "destitute foundling" — the lawyers have proved it, and the proof of their proofs is that I am obliged to accept the charity of my old governess, God bless her! If ever a man had a right to take back his word, you have. Take it, if you will. You are free!'

Giovanni stood up beside her, almost angry.

'Do you think I wanted your fortune?' he asked, a little pale under his tan.

'Do you think I am afraid of poverty?'

Her lips were still parted in a smile after she had asked the question, and with the gesture of an older woman she tapped his arm half reproachfully. The colour came back to his brown face.

'I fear poverty for you,' he answered, 'and I am going to fight it for your sake if you have the courage to wait for me. Have you?'

'I will wait for ever,' she said simply as she laid her hand in his.

'Then I shall leave the army at once,' he replied. 'So far, I have made what is called a good career, but promotion is slow and the pay is wretched until a man is very high up. An artillery officer is an engineer, you know, and a military engineer can always find well-paid work, especially if he is an electrician, as I am. In two years I promise you that we shall be able to marry and be at least comfortable, and there is no reason why I should not make a fortune quite equal to what my father has lost.'

He spoke with the perfect confidence of a gifted and sanguine man, sure of his own powers, and his words pleased her. Perhaps what had attracted her most in him from the beginning had been his enthusiasm and healthy faith in the world, which had contrasted brilliantly with her father's pessimism and bigoted political necrolatry, if I may coin a word from the Greek to express an old-fashioned Roman's blind worship of the dead past.

Angela was pleased, as any woman would have been, but she protested against what she knew to be a sacrifice.

'No,' she said decidedly, 'you must not give up the army and your career for the sake of making money, even for me. Do no officers marry on their pay? I am sure that many do, and manage very well indeed. You told me not long ago that you were expecting promotion from day to day; and in any case I could not marry you within a year, at the least.'

'If I do not begin working at once, that will be just a year lost,' objected Giovanni.

'A year! Will that make much difference?'

'Why not ten, then? As if a year would not be a century long, while I am waiting for you — as if it were not already half a lifetime since last month, when we told each other the truth! Wait? Yes, if I must; for ever, as you said awhile ago, if there is no other way. But if it can be helped, then not an hour, not a minute! Why should we let happiness pass us by and not take it when we may and can? There is not enough in the world, as it is; and you cannot even pretend that you are generous if you do not take your share, since what fate means for you is useless for any one else! No, dear, no! We will take the fruit there is on the tree, and leave none to rot on the branch after we are gone. Promise to marry me a year from to-day, and leave the rest to me — will you?"

'Yes — but promise me one thing, too. Do not resign to-morrow, nor next week, as I know you mean to do. Take a month to think it over, and to look about you. You are so impulsive — well, so generous — that you are capable of sending in your resignation to-morrow.'

'It is already written,' Giovanni answered. 'I was going to send it in to-night.'

'I knew it! But you must not. Please, please, take a little time — it will be so much wiser. I will wait for you for ever, or I will promise to marry you a year from to-day, even if we have to live on bread and water. Indeed I will! But, at least, be a little cautious! It will be far better to marry on your pay — and you will surely get your captaincy in a few months — than to be stranded without even that, in case you do not find the work you hope for. Don't you see? I am sure it is good advice.'

Giovanni knew that it was, if caution were ever worth practising in human affairs; but that has often been doubted by brave and light-hearted men. Giovanni yielded a little reluctantly. If she had asked him to make it two months instead of one, he would have refused, for it seemed to him intolerable to lose a moment between decision and action, and his thoughts doubled their stride with every step, in a geometrical progression; a moment hence, a minute would be an hour, an hour a month, a month a lifetime. Men have won battles in that temper; but it has sometimes cost them their life.

'I know you are sensible,' Giovanni said, taking Angela's hand between his, 'but it is to please you that I agree to wait a month. It is not because it looks wise, as it does. For one man who succeeds by wisdom, ten win by daring. Who knows what may chance in a month, or what may happen to put out of reach what I could do to-day?'

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'Nothing!'

Angela gave her answer with the delicious little smile of superiority which the youngest woman and even the merest girl can wear, when she is sure that she is right and that the man she loves is wrong. It may be only about sewing on a button, or about the weather, or it may concern great issues; but it is always the same when it comes: it exasperates weak men, and the stronger sort like it, as they more especially delight in all that is womanly in woman, from heroic virtue to pathetic weakness.

'Nothing can happen in a month to prevent you from resigning then, as you could to-day,' Angela said confidently.

The faint smile disappeared, and she grew thoughtful, not for herself, but for him, and looked at Saint Ursula again. Her hand still lay in his, on the edge of the mantelpiece, and while she gazed at the engraving she knew that he was looking at her and was moving nearer; she felt that he was going to kiss her, but she did not resist this time though the colour was rising in her throat, and just under the exquisitely shaped petal of peach-blossom on which his eyes were fixed, and which was really only the tip of her ear, though it was so like the leaf of a flower that the scent of the bloom came to his memory when his lips touched the spot at last.

His hand shut closer over hers at the same moment, and hers fluttered under his fingers like a small soft bird; but there was no resistance. He kissed the tip of her ear, and she turned towards him a little; his kiss pressed

her cool cheek, and she moved again; their eyes met, very near, and dark, and full of light, and then his lips touched hers at last.

Destiny has many disguises and many moods. Sometimes, as on that day at the telephone, the unexpected leaps up from its hiding-place and strikes stunning blows, right and left, like Orestes among the steers in Tauris, or a maniac let loose among sane men; but sometimes Fate lurks in her lair, silently poring over the tablets of the future, and she notes all we say, scrawling 'Folly' against our wisest speeches, and stamping 'So be it' under the carelessly spoken jest.

She was busy while the young lovers kissed for the first time, by the mantelpiece; but no inward warning voice had told Angela that she herself was sealing the order of her life irrevocably when she gave Giovanni the best advice she could, and he accepted it to please her, making his instinct obey his judgment for her sake. A man is foolish who takes an important step without consulting the woman who loves him most dearly, be she mother, sister, wife, or sweetheart; but he is rarely wise if he follows her advice, like a rule, to the letter, for no woman goes from thought to accomplishment by the same road as a man. You cannot make a pointer of a setter, nor teach a bulldog to retrieve.

If Giovanni had sent in his resignation that evening, or even during the next day, as he was ready to do, it would have been accepted in the ordinary course of things; he would then, without doubt, have found employment for his talents and energy, either at home or

abroad. He would in all probability have succeeded in life, because he possessed the elements of success; he would have married Angela in due time, and the two would probably have lived happily for many years, because they were suited to each other in all ways and were possessed of excellent constitutions. If all this had happened, their story would have little interest except for themselves, or as an example to young couples; and it is a deplorable fact that there is hardly anything so dull and tiresome in the world as a good example. The hoardings along life's dusty roads are plentifully plastered with good examples, in every stage of preservation, from those just fresh from the moral bill-poster's roll, redolent of paste, to the good old ones that are peeling off in tatters, as if in sheer despair because nobody has ever stopped to look at them. May the gods of literature keep all good story-tellers from concocting advertisements of the patent virtues!

The most important and decisive moment in Angela's life, from its beginning to its end, had passed so quietly that she never suspected its presence, and almost the very next instant brought her the first kiss of the only man she had ever loved, or was to love thereafter.

CHAPTER V

MADAME BERNARD had not overstated the advantages of the lodging she occasionally let to foreign ladies who travelled alone and practised economy, and Angela refused to occupy it till she had satisfied herself that her old governess's own room was just as large and just as sunny and just as comfortable.

In the first place, it was much bigger than she had expected, and when she had spread out all her possessions and put away her clothes, and had arranged her pretty toilet set and the few books that were quite her own, she found that she was not at all cramped for space. The ceiling was not very high, it was true, and there was only one window, but it was a very wide one, and outside it there was a broad iron shelf securely fixed, on which four good-sized flower-pots were set out in the sunshine. It was true that there were no flowers yet, but the two plants of carnations were full of buds and had been very carefully tended, a tiny rose-bush promised to bear three or four blossoms before long, and the pot of basil was beginning to send up curly green shoots. Opposite the window, and beyond the quiet street, there was a walled garden, in which there were some orange and mandarin trees.

Between the two bedrooms there was the sitting-room, which was a little smaller than either, but quite

big enough for two women. Indeed, Madame Bernard ate her meals there all winter, because the little dining-room at the back of the house was not so cheerful and was much colder. An enlarged coloured photograph of the long-deceased Captain Bernard, in the uniform worn by the French artillery at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, hung on one of the walls, over an upright piano; it had a black frame, and was decorated with a wreath of everlasting daisies tied with a black bow. Underneath the portrait a tiny holy-water basin of old Tyrolese pewter was fastened to the wall. This Madame Bernard filled every year at Easter, when the parish priest came to bless the rooms, and every year she renewed the wreath on the anniversary of her husband's death; for she was a faithful soul and practised such little rites with a sort of cheerful satisfaction that was not exactly devout, but certainly had a religious source. Captain Bernard had been a dashing fellow and there was no knowing what his soul might not need in the place his widow vaguely described as 'beyond' when she spoke of his presumable state, though in the case of Angela's father, for instance, it was always 'heaven' or 'paradise.' Apparently Madame Bernard had the impression that her husband's immortal part was undergoing some very necessary cure before partaking of unmixed bliss.

'Military men have so many temptations, my dear,' she said to Angela, thinking more of the deceased Captain than of being tactful, — 'I mean,' she said, correcting herself, 'in France.'

Angela was not afraid of temptation for Giovanni;

rightly or wrongly, she trusted that her love would be his shield against the wicked world and her name his prayer in need, and she smiled at Madame Bernard's speech. The big old parrot on his perch cocked his head.

'Especially the cavalry and artillery,' the good lady went on to explain.

'À drrroite — conversion!' roared the parrot in a terrific voice of command.

Angela jumped in her chair, for it was the first time she had heard the creature speak in that tone; but Madame Bernard laughed, as if it pleased her.

'It is absolutely my poor husband's tone,' she said calmly. 'Coco,' she said, turning to the bellicose bird, 'the Prussians are there!'

'Feu!' yelled the parrot suddenly, dancing with rage on his bar. 'Feu! 'cré nom d'un nom d'un p'tit bon Dieu!'

'Every intonation!' laughed the little Frenchwoman gaily. 'You understand why I love my Coco!'

But Angela thought there was something grimly horrible in the coming back of the dead soldier's voice from battles fought long ago.

Giovanni came to see her two days after she had moved, but this time Madame Bernard did not leave them together very long. She had a lively sense of her responsibility, now that the young girl was altogether in her charge, and she felt that the proprieties must be strictly observed. It must never be thought that Giovanni was free to see Angela alone whenever he pleased, merely because her people had turned her out.

He looked distressed, and the young girl at once suspected some new trouble; and she was not mistaken, for her advice had begun to bear fruit already, and the inevitable was closing in upon them both.

He told the story in a few words. It had been decided in the War Office for some time that a small exploring and surveying expedition should be sent up the country from the Italian colony at Massowah with the idea of planning some permanent means of inland communication with the British possessions. Giovanni's father had seen a chance for him to distinguish himself and to obtain more rapid promotion, and by using all the considerable influence he possessed in high quarters he had got him appointed to be the engineering officer of the party. The young man had already been two years in Africa, before being appointed to the Staff, and had done exceptionally good service, which was an excellent reason for using him again; and chance further favoured the plan, because the officer who had first been selected for the place, and who was an older man, was much needed in the War Office, to his own exceeding disgust. The expedition might be attended with considerable danger and would certainly be full of adventure, for there had recently been trouble with the tribes in that very region; but to send a strong force was out of the question, for political reasons, though the work to be done was so urgently necessary that it could not be put off much longer.

Old General Severi sincerely hoped Angela might yet marry his son, and was convinced that the best thing pos-

sible would be to secure for the latter the first opportunity for quick promotion, instead of allowing him to leave the army in order to find more lucrative employment. The expedition would be gone five or six months, perhaps, and there were many reasons why it would be better to keep the young people apart for a time. Any one would understand that, he was sure. While Angela was living obscurely with a former governess, a brilliant young officer of some distinction, like Giovanni, could not see her regularly without seriously compromising her. It was the way of the world and could not be helped, yet if Giovanni stayed in Rome it would be too much to expect that he should stay away from the little apartment in Trastevere. So the matter was settled, and when he came to see Angela that afternoon he had just had an interview with his chief, who had informed him of his appointment, and at the same time of his promotion to be captain. The expedition was to leave Italy in a few days, and he would have barely time to provide himself with what was strictly necessary for the climate. He explained all this to Angela and Madame Bernard.

'If you had only let me resign the other day,' he said ruefully, when he had finished his account, 'nobody could have found fault then! But now, I must face the laugh of every man I know!'

Angela looked up quickly, in evident surprise.

'Why?' she asked. 'I see nothing to laugh at in such an expedition.'

'I am not going to accept the appointment,' Giovanni answered with decision. 'I asked for twenty-four hours

to consider it, though the General seemed very much surprised.'

'But you cannot refuse!' Angela cried. 'They will say you are afraid!'

'They may say whatever occurs to them, for I will not go, and I shall resign at once, as I said I would. My mind is made up.'

'You cannot refuse this,' Angela repeated confidently. 'If you are obliged to admit that there is some danger in it, though you wish there were none, because you safely could refuse to go, it must be very dangerous indeed. Tell me the truth, as far as you know it.'

'It would depend on circumstances——' Giovanni hesitated.

'You have told me that if the Government dared, it would send a large force to protect the expedition. The larger that force would be, the greater the danger if there is no protection at all. Is that true, or not?'

'It is true, in one way, but——'

'There is no condition!' Angela interrupted him energetically. 'It is enough that it is going to be dangerous in one way, as you say!'

'No one can say that I ever avoided danger before,' he objected.

'They will say many things if you refuse to go. They will shrug their shoulders and say that you have lost your nerve, perhaps! That is a favourite expression, and you know how people say it. Or if you make money soon after you resign, they will say that you preferred a fortune to risking your life for your country. Or else

they will say that a woman has made a coward of you, and that I am she!'

'Coward!' yelled the parrot in a tone of withering contempt, and the creature actually spat in disgust.

Giovanni started violently, for he had not noticed the bird in the room. Then he tried to laugh at his own surprise.

'I do not wonder that you are surprised, Monsieur,' said Madame Bernard with a pleasant smile. 'Oh, Coco has exactly my poor husband's voice!'

'I can brave a parrot's opinion,' Giovanni said, attempting to speak gaily.

'Will you brave mine?' Angela asked.

'You certainly do not think I am afraid to go,' he answered, 'for you know why I mean to refuse. My first duty is to you. As I am placed, it would be cowardly to be afraid to face public opinion in doing that duty, and to keep you waiting six months or a year longer than necessary, when I have promised to provide means for us to marry within a year. That would deserve to be called cowardice!'

'Sale Prussien! 'cré nom d'une pipe!' yelled Coco in a tone of disgust.

'Really!' exclaimed Giovanni, with some annoyance. 'Does the thing take me for an hereditary enemy, Madame?'

Madame Bernard rose with a little laugh and went to the parrot's perch, holding out her hand.

'Come, Coco!' she said, coaxing him. 'It is peace now, and we can go home to Paris again.'

'Paris' meant her bedroom in bird language; it also meant being bribed to be quiet with good things, and Coco strutted from his perch to her finger.

'Marche!' he commanded in a sharp tone, and as she moved he began to whistle the Marseillaise with great spirit.

She marched off, laughing and keeping step to the tune till she disappeared into her room, shutting the door behind her. As it closed Giovanni caught Angela's left hand and drew it to him. She laid her right on his, quietly and affectionately.

'Am I never to see you alone?' he asked, almost in a whisper.

'When you come to say good-bye before starting,' Angela answered. 'I will ask her to leave us quite alone then. But now it will only be for a minute or two.'

Thereupon, with the most natural movement in the world, she lifted her hands, brought his face close to hers and kissed him, drew back a little, looked gravely into his astonished eyes for some seconds, and then kissed him again.

'I love you much more than you love me,' she said with great seriousness. 'I am sure of it.'

It was all very different from what he had expected. He had vaguely fancied that for a long time every kiss would have to be won from her by a little struggle, and that every admission of her love would be the reward of his own eloquence; instead, she took the lead herself with a simplicity that touched him more than anything else could have done.

'You see!' she cried, with the intonation of a laugh not far away. 'I took you by surprise, because I am right about it! What have you to say?'

He said nothing, but his lips hurt hers a little in the silence. She shivered slightly, for she had not yet dreamed that a kiss could hurt and yet be too short. The sound of Madame Bernard's voice came from the next room, still talking to the parrot. Angela laid her hand on Giovanni's gold-laced sleeve and nestled beside him, with her head in the hollow of his shoulder.

'I have always wanted to do this,' she said in a drowsy little voice, as if she wished she could go to sleep where she was. 'It is my place. When you are away in Africa, at night, under the stars, you will dream that I am just here, resting in my very own place.'

She felt his warm breath in her hair as he answered.

'I will not go; I will not leave you.'

'But you must,' she said, quickly straightening herself and looking into his face. 'I should not love you as I do, if I could bear to think of your staying here, to let men laugh at you, as you say they would!'

'It is not like resigning on the day after war is declared!' he retorted, trying to speak lightly.

'It is!' she cried, with a sort of eager anxiety in her voice. 'There is only a difference in the degree — and perhaps it is worse! If there were war, you would be one man in a hundred thousand, but now you will be one in ten or twenty, or as many as are to go. Think what it would be if you were the only man in Italy, the one, single, only officer who could certainly accomplish

something very dangerous to help your country — and if you refused to do it!'

'There are hundreds of better men than I for the work,' objected Giovanni.

'I doubt it. Are there hundreds of engineer officers on the General Staff?'

'No, but there are plenty ——'

'A score, perhaps, and you have been chosen, no matter why, and there is danger, and there is a great thing to be done, perhaps a great good, which in the end will save the lives, or help the lives, of many Italians! And you want to refuse to do it — for what? For a woman, for a girl you love! Do you think she will love you the more, or less, for keeping out of danger, if she is a true Italian as she thinks you are? Why is it that our Italy, which no one thought much of a few years ago, is coming to the front in so many ways now? It was not by staying at home for women's sake that our sailors have got nearer the North Pole than all the others who have tried! It is not by avoiding danger that our officers are learning to astonish everybody with their riding ——'

'That is different,' objected Giovanni. 'It is one thing to do daring things ——'

'Yes,' interrupted Angela, not letting him speak, 'it is the one and only thing, when it is good daring and can bring good, and helps the world to see that Italy is not dead yet, in spite of all that has been said and written against us and our unity. No, no, I say! Go, do your duty, do and dare, wherever and howsoever your country needs you, and I will wait for you, and be glad to wait

for that one reason, which is the best of all. If you love me half as dearly as I love you, go back at once and tell your chief that you are ready, and are proud to be used wherever you can be of any use! And if there is danger to be faced, think that you are to face it for my sake as well as for Italy's, and not in spite of me, for I would ten thousand times rather that you should die in doing your duty — ever so obscurely — than stay here to be called a coward in order that we may be rich when we marry!'

Giovanni listened, more and more surprised at her energy and quick flow of words, but glad at heart that she was urging him to do what was right and honourable.

'It was for you that I meant to stay,' he said. 'Hard as it is to leave you, it would have been harder to refuse the appointment. I will go.'

A little silence followed, and Madame Bernard, no longer hearing their voices, and having said everything she had to say to her parrot, judged that it was time for her to come back and play chaperon again. She was careful to make a good deal of noise with the latch before she opened the door.

'Well, Monsieur,' she asked, on the threshold, 'has Donna Angela persuaded you that she is right? I heard her making a great speech!'

'She is a firebrand,' laughed Giovanni, 'and a good patriot as well! She ought to be in Parliament.'

'You are a feminist, I perceive,' answered Madame Bernard. 'But Joan of Arc would be in the Chambers if she could come back to this world. The people would

elect her, she would present herself in the tribune, and she would say, "Aha, messieurs! Here I am! We shall talk, you and I." And our little Donna Angela is a sort of Joan of Arc. People do not know it, but I do, for I have often heard her make beautiful speeches, as if she were inspired!'

'It takes no inspiration to see what is right,' Angela said, shaking her head. 'The only difficulty is to do it!'

'Even that is easy when you lead,' Giovanni answered thoughtfully, and without the least intention of flattering her.

He had seen a side of her character of which he had not even suspected the existence, and there was something about it so large and imposing that he was secretly a little ashamed of feeling less strong than she seemed. In two successive meetings he had come to her with his own mind made up, but in a few moments she had talked him over to her point of view without the least apparent difficulty, and had sent him away fully determined to do the very opposite of that which he had previously decided to do. It was a strange experience for a young man of great energy and distinctly exceptional intelligence, and he did not understand it.

He stayed barely half-an-hour, for Madame Bernard showed no disposition to leave the room again, and he felt the difficulty of keeping up an indifferent conversation in her presence, as well as the impossibility of talking freely to Angela of what was uppermost in her thoughts and his own. It was true that the governess knew all about it, and there are excellent women of that sort

whose presence does not always hinder lovers from discussing their future; but either Madame Bernard was not one of these by nature, or else the two felt the difference of her nationality too much. The French are perhaps the only civilised nation whom no people of other nations can thoroughly understand, and who, with very few individual exceptions, do not understand any people but themselves. They have a way of looking at life which surprises and sometimes amuses men of all other nationalities; they take some matters very seriously which seem of trivial consequence to us, but they are witty at the expense of certain simple feelings and impulses which we gravely regard as fundamentally important, if not sacred. They can be really and truly heroic, to the point of risking life and limb and happiness, about questions at which we snap our fingers, but they can be almost insolently practical, in the sense of feeling no emotion while keenly discerning their own interest, in situations where our tempers or our prejudices would rouse us to recklessness. In their own estimation they are always right, and so are we in ours, no doubt; but whereas they consider themselves the Chosen People and us the Gentiles, or compare themselves with us as the Greeks compared themselves with the Barbarians, we, on our side, do not look down upon their art and literature as they undoubtedly do on ours, and a good many of us are rather too ready to accept them as something more than our equals in both. When I say 'we,' I do not mean only English-speaking people, but other Europeans also. I have overheard Frenchmen discussing

all sorts of things in trains, on steamers, in picture-galleries, in libraries, in the streets, from Tiflis to London and from London to the Pacific, but I have never yet heard Frenchmen admit among themselves that a modern work of art, or book, or play was really first-rate, if it was not French. There is something monumental in their conviction of their own superiority, and I sincerely believe it has had much to do with their success, as a nation, in the arts of peace as well as in war. A man who is honestly convinced that he is better than his opponent is not easily put down in peaceful competition, and will risk his life in action with a gallantry and daring that command the admiration of all brave men; and it is a singular fact that German soldiers did not call Frenchmen cowards after the great war, whereas it was a very common thing to hear Frenchmen inveigh against 'those dirty, cowardly Prussians' who had got the better of them. Men who can take such a point of view as that must be utterly unlike other people.

This little digression should explain why Angela and Madame Bernard never quite understood each other, in spite of the elder woman's almost motherly love for the girl and the latter's devoted gratitude.

They talked about Giovanni when he was gone, of course, but neither said all she thought about him, because she feared that the other would think a little differently. The cheerful Frenchwoman had gone through life with the belief that it is better, on the whole, to make oneself comfortable in this world, if it can be managed on honest principles, than to worry oneself

about heroics, and in the calm recesses of her practical little soul she was sure that, in Angela's place, she would have told Giovanni to resign as soon as possible and find some pleasant and well-paid occupation for his married life. All Angela's talk about a man's duty to his country would be very well in time of war, when there was glory to be got; but it was nonsense in ordinary times, where one man would do as well as another, to risk his life in a small expedition, and when it was distinctly advisable not to be that one. But she knew also that she had better not try to explain this to Angela, who was evidently a little mad on the point, most probably because she was an Italian. For Italians, Germans, Spaniards, Englishmen, and Americans were all completely insane; there was some little hope for Austrians and a good deal for Russians, in Madame Bernard's opinion, but there was none for the rest, though they might be very nice people. The safest thing was to humour them. She had given lessons in Roman families that were half Austrian and even half Russian, for the Romans have always been very cosmopolitan in their marriages, but Angela was quite Italian on both sides, and so was Giovanni. It was therefore pretty certain that they would behave like lunatics, sooner or later, the good lady thought; and they apparently were beginning already.

It is needless to dwell long on what followed, since what has been narrated so far is only the introduction to Angela's story and the exposition of the circumstances which determined her subsequent life. As in most cases,

was hard to resist, as she sat by the window, listening to the distant sound of wheels in the street; it was the first great temptation she had ever felt in her life, and as she faced it she was surprised at its strength. But she would not yield. In her own gentle womanliness she found something she recognised but could not account for; was it possible that she had some strength of character, after all? Could it be that she inherited a little of that rigid will that had made her father so like her idea of a Puritan? He had always told her that she was weak, that she would be easily influenced by her surroundings, that her only hope must be to obtain Divine aid for her feeble, feminine nature. She had believed him, because he had taught her that she must, even in the smallest things, and this was a great one.

But now something cruelly strong was tearing at her, to make her go into the next room and beg Madame Bernard to help her find Giovanni, if only that she might see his face and hear his voice and say good-bye just once more. She laid her hands on the window-sill as if she would hold herself down in her chair, and she refused to move; not because it looked foolish, for that would not have mattered, but because she chose not to yield. Perhaps she was too proud to give way, and pride, they told her, was always a sin, but that did not matter either. There was an unexpected satisfaction in finding one thin strand of steel among the pliant threads of her untried young will.

Besides, she would have much to bear, and if she did not begin at once, she would never grow used to the

burden. That was another reason for not following her instinct, and a very good one.

To help herself, she began to say one of those prayers of which she knew so many by heart. To her surprise, it disturbed her instead of strengthening her determination, and while her lips were moving she felt an almost overwhelming impulse to do what she was determined not to do at any cost. The sensation startled her, and in a moment she felt that tide of darkness rising to drown her which had almost overwhelmed her while she was kneeling beside her dead father. Her hand pressed the stone window-sill in terror of the awful presence.

It is familiar to those few who have knowingly or unwittingly tried to penetrate the darkness to the light beyond. It has been called the Guardian, the Dweller on the Threshold, the Wall, the Destroyer, the Giant Despair. Many have turned back from it as from death itself, some have gone raving mad in fighting their way through it, some have actually died in it, of failure of the heart from fright. Some come upon it unawares in their reasoning, some in the hour of profound meditation; some know by long experience where it is and keep away from it; some are able to pass through it with unshaken mind and unbroken nerves. Scarcely one in a million even guesses that it exists; of those who do, ninety-nine in a hundred turn from it in horror; of the remaining score of those who face it in a whole generation of men, more than half perish in mind or body; the last ten, perhaps, win through, and these are they that have understood the writing over the temple

door, the great 'Know thyself,' the precept of the Delphic Oracle and of all mystics before Trophonios and since.

Angela's lips ceased moving, and very soon she was herself again, quietly sitting there and wondering what had frightened her so badly, and whether there might not be something wrong with her heart, because she remembered how it had beat twice quickly in succession and then had seemed to stand still while she could have counted ten, quite slowly.

What she called her temptation left her at peace till she knew that Giovanni's train had started. In imagination she could hear the engine's whistle, the hissing of the steam from the purge-cocks at starting, the quickening thunder of the high-pressure exhaust, the clanking noise as the slowly moving train passed over the old-fashioned turn-tables, and the long retreating rumble as the express gathered speed and ran out of sight.

Then it was over, for good and all; Giovanni was gone beyond the possibility of seeing him again and the strain relaxed. Angela put out her light, and when she fell asleep a quarter of an hour later, drops she did not even feel were slowly trickling from her lids to the pillow; for there are women who do not easily cry when they are awake, but when they are sleeping their tired eyes shed the pent-up tears and are refreshed by them.

Angela was not left alone with Madame Bernard as much as she had expected after the first few days, nor even as much as she might have wished. The feeling

against the Princess Chiaromonte was strong, and as soon as it became known that Angela had found a safe refuge with her former governess, she received several invitations from more or less distant connections to spend some time with them in the country during the coming summer. At the present juncture, in the height of the season, it was natural that no one should want a forlorn young girl in deep mourning to make a town visit. She would have been a killjoy and a wet blanket in any house, that was clear, and nothing could be more thoroughly respectable and proper than that she should spend the first weeks under Madame Bernard's roof and protection.

Some of Angela's friends of her own age came to see her by and by and offered to take her to drive in their mothers' carriages or motor cars, but she would not go, and though she thanked them with grateful words for thinking of her, most of them thought, and told each other, that she had not been very glad to see them and would rather be left alone. They supposed that she was still too much overcome to wish for their society, and as young people who drop out of the world after being in it a very short time are soon forgotten, they troubled themselves very little about her. If she ever chose to come out of her solitude, they said, she would be welcome again, but since she wished to be left to herself it was very convenient to humour her, because the Princess Chiaromonte had as good as declared that there were 'excellent reasons' for her own apparently heartless conduct. No one knew what that meant, but when she

spoke in that way it was more blessed to accept her statement than to get her enmity by doubting it. The Chiaromonte family were at liberty to settle their own affairs as seemed best in their own eyes, and as the law could not interfere, no one else felt inclined to do so. Angela had no near relations on her mother's side to protect her or take her in.

Six weeks passed away without incident after Giovanni had left, and she had received three letters from him — one from Naples, written before going on board the steamer, one from Port Said, and one from Massowah after his arrival there. The expedition was to start in three days, he said; it had been waiting for him and the officer who was to take the command, and who had gone with him.

A short time after receiving this last letter Angela was reading the news from an evening paper to Madame Bernard, translating the paragraphs offhand into French, by force of habit, because her old governess had often made her do it for practice.

Suddenly her eyes became fixed, the colour left her face, and she dropped the newspaper with a short, loud cry, falling back in her chair at the same moment.

Madame Bernard snatched up the sheet and glanced at the place where the girl had last been reading.

The expedition had fallen in with hostile natives a week after starting and had been massacred to a man. The names of the dead were given, and Giovanni's was the second on the list.

CHAPTER VI

ANGELA lived for weeks in a state of sleepless apathy, so far as her companion could see. She scarcely spoke, and ate barely enough to keep herself alive. She seemed not to sleep at all, for two or three times during every night Madame Bernard got up and came to her room, and she always found her lying quite motionless on her back, her eyes wide open and staring at the tasteless little pattern of flowers stencilled in colours on the ceiling. Once Madame Bernard proposed to take away the night-light that burned in a cup on the floor, but Angela shook her head almost energetically. She never opened a book either, nor occupied herself in any way, but seemed content to sit still all day and to lie awake all night, never complaining, and never even speaking unless her friend asked her a direct question. Every morning at sunrise she put on her hat and went to the ancient church of San Crisogono, which is served by Trinitarian monks. Sometimes Madame Bernard went with her, but more often she was accompanied by the one woman-servant who cooked and did the housework.

The unhappy girl found neither consolation nor hope in the daily service; she went to it because, somehow, it seemed to be the only thing she could do for the dead. She knelt down every day on the same spot, and remained kneeling till after the priest and the acolyte were

gone; she took her missal with her, but never looked at it, and her lips never moved in prayer; she felt no impulse to go to confession, nor any devotional craving for the Communion. The mass was a mere form to her, but she attended it regularly, as if she expected that much of herself and would not do less than the least that seemed to be her duty. That was all. Prayer in any form of words frightened her, for it soon brought her near to that blinding darkness which she had already met twice and had learned to dread; her present misfortune was incomparably greater than those that had gone before, and she was sure that if the outer night rose round her again it would take her soul down into itself to eternal extinction. If she had been physically stronger, she might have tried to call this a foolish delusion; weak as she was, and growing daily weaker, it seemed as certain as that her body must perish instantly if she walked over a precipice. The past was distorted, the present had no meaning, and there was no future; she vaguely understood Dante's idea that the body may be left on earth, apparently alive, for years after the soul has departed from it, for the evil Alberigo's spirit told the poet that his own body and Branca d' Oria's were still animated by demons when their souls were already in the torment of the eternal ice. But Angela felt rather as if her living self were a mere senseless shell, uninhabited by any spirit, bad or good, and moved by the mechanics of nature rather than by her own will or another's.

Madame Bernard watched her with growing anxiety

as the days and weeks brought no change. The little lodging in Trastevere was very silent, and Coco sat disconsolately drooping his wings on his perch when his mistress was out, as she was during more than half the day, giving the lessons by which she and Angela lived. The girl sometimes did not move from her chair throughout the long morning any more than if she had been paralysed, or at most she tried to tend the flowers. The roses were blooming now, and on fine days, when the windows were open, the aromatic perfume of the young carnations floated in with the sunbeams. Angela did not notice the scent, and for all the pleasure the blossoms gave her they might have been turnips and potatoes. But there was a feeble underlying thought of duty in plucking off a small withered leaf here and there, and in picking out the tiny weeds that tried to grow round the flower-stems. From very far away she heard Madame Bernard telling her, an age ago, that she could tend the flowers and take care of the parrot by way of helping in the house.

Coco regarded her efforts with melancholy contempt, and turned his back on her when she came near him, and even when she changed the water in his tin cup. As he only drank three or four drops in a day, it probably seemed to him a work of supererogation. While his mistress was out he rarely uttered a sound; but when he heard her footstep in the short passage outside, he gave vent to his feelings and hailed her return with boisterous shouts and unearthly whistling of old French military tunes. Even the noise he made did not disturb

Angela; she hardly heard him, for her nerves were not overwrought, but deadened almost to insensibility.

Madame Bernard consulted a young doctor, a man of talent, who was taking lessons of her for the sake of his practice among foreigners. She used to say that between her pupils, and their friends and relations, she could get the best advice on any matter without paying a penny for it. The young physician answered that he could not help her much without seeing the patient, but that the best thing for Angela would be to eat and sleep well and not to fret.

Some such idea had probably occurred to the little Frenchwoman, for she laughed gaily in the doctor's face, and he, not being paid to look serious, joined in her laughter.

'You cannot say it is bad advice,' he said, 'and you wanted me to say something. Let me see the young lady, and I will tell you honestly whether I know of anything that will do her good, as I would tell a colleague.'

They agreed that he should call one evening on pretence of taking an extra lesson in a leisure hour; he came at the appointed time, and watched Angela narrowly during the short time she remained in the room. When she was gone, he gave his opinion without hesitation.

'The best thing for her would be a good illness,' he said. 'You look surprised! I will try to explain. That young lady is stronger than you think. It would do her a world of good to shed tears, but she cannot because her unconscious power of resistance has been

exercised till it has grown rigid. You have heard of Hindu devotees who hold up one arm till it stiffens in that position, so that they could not move it if they tried. That is an image of what I mean, unless it is the thing itself. After learning the terrible news Donna Angela unconsciously steeled herself against her natural impulse to break down. She has a strong will, and the result is what you see. The strain of resisting was so great that it deadened her to all sensation in a few hours. If she could fall ill, the tension would relax; in my opinion it will do so when her physical strength is worn out by starvation and lack of sleep, but a simple specific malady, like the whooping-cough or the measles, would be better for her. If you cannot break up her present condition, and if she has any organic weakness of the heart, it may stop beating one of these days. That is what is called dying of a broken heart, my dear Madame Bernard. There is no medicine against that like a broken leg!'

'Fie!' cried Madame Bernard. 'You have no human feeling at all!'

'I am sorry,' answered the physician, with a smile, 'but it is my business to have a head instead. You asked my opinion and I have given it, as I would to another doctor. The old-fashioned ones would laugh at me, the younger ones would understand.'

'If you could only make the poor child sleep a little! Is there nothing?'

'She is not neurasthenic,' the doctor objected. 'It would be of no use to give her sleeping medicines, for

after a few days they would have no effect, except to excite her nerves unnaturally.'

'Or something to give her an appetite,' suggested Madame Bernard vaguely.

'She has an excellent appetite if she only knew it. The reason why she does not eat is that she does not know she is hungry, though she is half starved. I served in the African campaign when I was a young military surgeon. I have seen healthy men faint for want of food when they had plenty at hand because they could not realise that they were hungry in their intense preoccupation. Great emotions close the entrance to the stomach, often for a considerable time. It is well known, and it is easier than you think to form the habit of living on next to nothing. It is the first step that counts.'

'As they said of Saint Denis when he carried his head three steps after it was cut off,' said Madame Bernard thoughtfully, and without a smile.

'Precisely,' the doctor assented. 'I myself have seen a man sit his horse at a full gallop, without relaxing his hold, for fifty yards after he had been shot through the head. The seat of the nerves that direct automatic motion is not in the brain, but appears to be in the body, near the spine. When it is not injured, what used to be called unconscious cerebration may continue for several seconds after death. Similarly, bodily habits, like feeling hunger or being insensible to it, appear to have their origin in those ganglions and not in any sort of thought. Consequently, thought alone, without a

strong exercise of the will, has little effect upon such habits of the body. When a man does a thing he does not mean to do, and says "I cannot help it," he is admitting this fact. If you were to ask Donna Angela if she means to starve herself to death deliberately, she would deny it with indignation, but would tell you that she really cannot eat, and meanwhile she is starving. Give her a comparatively harmless illness like the measles, severe enough to break up the ordinary automatic habits of the body, and she will eat again, with an excellent appetite. In all probability I could give her the measles by artificial means, but unfortunately that sort of treatment is not yet authorised!'

The young doctor, who was not by any means a dreamer, seemed much amused at his own conclusion, which looks absurd even on paper, and Madame Bernard did not believe a word he said. In questions of medicine women are divided into two great classes, those who will consult any doctor and try anything, and those who only ask the doctor's opinion when they are forced to, and who generally do precisely the opposite of what he suggests. This is a more practical view and is probably the safer, if they must go to one of the two extremes. Moreover, doctors are so much inclined to disagree that when three of them give a unanimous opinion it is apt to be worthless.

The only immediate result of Madame Bernard's consultation with the doctor was that she disappointed one of her pupils the next day in order to gain an hour, which she devoted to making a very exquisite 'mousse de

volaille' for Angela. The poor girl was much touched, but could only eat two or three mouthfuls, and the effort she made to overcome her repugnance was so unmistakable that the good little Frenchwoman was more anxious for her than hurt at the failure.

She had tried two sciences, she said to herself, but the doctor of medicine had talked the nonsense of theories to her, and the combined wisdom of Vatel, Brillat-Savarin, and Carême had proved fruitless. A person who could not eat Madame Bernard's 'mousse de volaille' could only be cured by a miracle. Accordingly, she determined to consult a churchman without delay, and went out early in the afternoon. Angela did not notice that she was dressed with more than usual care, as if for a visit of importance.

She had been gone about half-an-hour, and the young girl was sitting in her accustomed place, listless and apathetic as usual, when the door-bell rang, and a moment later the woman-servant came in, saying that a foreign gentleman was on the landing who insisted on seeing Angela, even though she was alone. After giving a long and not flattering description of his appearance, the woman held out the card he had given her. Angela glanced at it and read the name of Filmore Durand, and above, in pencil, half-a-dozen words: 'I have brought you a portrait.'

Angela did not understand in the least, though she tried hard to concentrate her thoughts.

'Ask the gentleman to come in,' she answered at last, hardly knowing what she said.

She turned her face to the window again, and in the course of thirty seconds, when she was roused by Durand's voice in the room, she had almost forgotten that he was in the house. She had not heard English spoken since she had left his studio on the morning when her father died, and she started at the sound. For weeks, nothing had made such an impression on her.

She rose to receive the great painter, who was standing near the table in the middle of the room, looking at her in surprise and real anxiety, for she was little more than a shadow of the girl he had painted six weeks or two months earlier. He himself had brought in a good-sized picture, wrapped in new brown paper; it stood beside him on the floor, reaching as high as his waist, and his left hand rested on the upper edge. He held out the other to Angela, who took it apathetically.

'You have been very ill,' he said in a tone of concern.

'No,' she answered. 'I am only a little tired. Will you not sit down?'

She sank into her seat again, and one thin hand lay on the cushioned arm of the chair. Instead of seating himself, Durand lifted the picture, still wrapped up, and set it upright on the table, so that it faced her.

'I heard,' he said in a low voice, 'so I did this for you from memory and a photograph.'

There was a sudden crackling and tearing of the strong paper as he ripped it off with a single movement, and then there was absolute silence for some time. Angela seemed not even to breathe, as she leaned forward with parted lips and unwinking, wondering eyes.

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Then, without even a warning breath, a cry broke from her heart.

'He is not dead! You have seen him again! He is alive — they have cheated me!'

Then she choked and leaned back, pressing her handkerchief to her mouth.

Instead of answering, the painter bent his head and looked down sideways at his own astounding handiwork, and for the second time in that year he was almost satisfied. Presently, as Angela said nothing more, he was going to move the canvas, to show it in a better light, but she thought he meant to take it away.

'No!' she cried imperatively. 'Not yet! Let me see it — let me understand ——'

Her words died away and she was silent again, her eyes fixed on the portrait. At last she rose, came forward, and laid both her thin hands on the narrow black and gold frame.

'I must have it,' she said. 'You must let me have it, though I cannot pay for it. But I will some day. I will work till I can earn enough money, or till I die — and if that comes soon, they will give you back the picture. You cannot take it away!'

Durand saw that she had not understood.

'It is for you,' he said. 'I painted it to give to you. You see, after your father died, I kept yours — I never meant them to have it, but it seemed as if I owed you something for it, and this is to pay my debt. Do you see?'

'How kind you are!' she cried. 'How very, very

kind! I do not quite follow the idea — my head is always so tired now — but I knew you would understand how I should feel — if I accepted it without any return!'

So far as arithmetic went, the man of genius and the broken-hearted girl were equally far from ordinary reckoning. Durand knew that by a turn of luck he had been able to keep the only portrait he had ever been sorry to part with when it was finished, and he was intimately convinced that he owed somebody something for such an unexpected pleasure; on her side, Angela was quite sure that unless the portrait of the man she had loved was to be an equivalent for some sort of obligation she could not be satisfied to keep it all her life unpaid for.

It filled the little sitting-room with light and colour, as a Titian might have done; it was as intensely alive as Giovanni Severi had been — the eyes were full of those quick little coruscations of fire that had made them so unlike those of other men, the impulsive nostrils seemed to quiver, the healthy young blood seemed to come and go in the tanned cheeks, the square shoulders were just ready to make that quick, impatient little movement that had been so characteristic of him, so like the sudden tension of every muscle when a thoroughbred scents sport or danger. No ordinary artist would ever have seen all there was in the man, even in a dozen sittings, but the twin gifts of sight and memory had unconsciously absorbed and held the whole, and a skill that was never outdone in its time had made memory itself visible on the canvas. Something that was neither

a 'harmless illness' nor a 'miracle' had waked Angela from her torpor.

'How can I thank you?' she asked, after a long pause. 'You do not know what it is to me to see his living face — you will call it an illusion — it seems as if ——'

She broke off suddenly and pressed her handkerchief to her lips again.

'Only what you call the unreal can last unchanged for a while,' the painter said, catching at the word she had used, and thinking more of his art than of her. 'Only an ideal can be eternal, but every honest attempt to give it shape has a longer life than any living creature. Nature makes only to destroy, but art creates for the very sake of preserving the beautiful.'

She heard each sentence, but was too absorbed in the portrait to follow his meaning closely. Perhaps it would have escaped her if she had tried.

'Only good and evil are everlasting,' she said, almost unconsciously repeating words she had heard somewhere when she was a child.

Durand looked at her quickly, but he saw that she was not really thinking.

'What is "good"?' he asked, as if he were sure that there was no answer to the question.

It attracted her attention, and she turned to him; she was coming back to life.

'Whatever helps people is good,' she said.

'The French proverb says "Help thyself and God will help thee,"' suggested Durand.

'No, it should be "Help others, and God will help you,"' Angela answered.

The artist fixed his eyes on her as he nodded a silent assent; and suddenly, though her face was so changed, he knew it was more like his portrait of her than ever, and that the prophecy of his hand was coming to fulfilment.

He stayed a moment longer, and asked if he could be of any service to her or Madame Bernard. She thanked him vaguely, and almost smiled. He felt instinctively that she was thinking of what she had last said, and was wishing that some one would tell her how she might do something for others, rather than that another should do anything for her.

She went with him to the door at the head of the stairs and let him out herself.

'Thank you,' she said, 'thank you! You don't know what you have done for me!'

He looked at her in thoughtful silence for a few seconds, holding her hand as if they were old friends.

'There is no such thing as death,' he said gravely.

And with this odd speech he left her and went slowly down the narrow stone steps; and though she watched him till he disappeared at the next landing, he did not once turn his head.

When she was in the sitting-room she set the framed picture on a straight chair near the window and sat down before it in her accustomed seat; and Durand's last words came back to her again and again, as if they were begging to be remembered and understood. Her memory brought with them many exhortations and sayings

from the sacred books, but none of them seemed to mean just what she knew that little speech of his must mean if she could quite understand it.

She had come to life again unexpectedly, and the spell of her dreadful solitude was broken. She did not think it strange that her eyes were dry as she gazed at the well-loved face, while the inner voice told her that there was 'no such thing as death.' The dead man had done his duty, and he expected her to do hers until the time came for them to meet for ever.

In the aimless wandering of her thoughts during the past weeks she had only understood that he was gone. In an uncounted moment, while she had been turning over the leaves of a book, or idly talking with Madame Bernard, or plucking a withered leaf from one of the plants outside the window, he had been fighting for his life and had lost it. Perhaps she had been quietly asleep just then. She had heard people say they were sure that if anything happened to those they dearly loved, some warning would reach them; she had heard tales of persons appearing at the moment of their death to those dearest to them, and even to indifferent people. Such stories were but idle talk, for while she had been reading the news out to Madame Bernard, she had been expecting to hear that the expedition was advancing successfully on its way, she had been wondering what chance there was of getting a letter from the interior, she had been intimately convinced that Giovanni was safe, well, and making good progress, when he had been dead a fortnight.

Madame Bernard had read the details, so far as they were known, but she had wisely said nothing except that the news was fully confirmed. Angela herself had refused to touch a newspaper since that day; it had been enough that he was gone — to know how, or even to guess, would be a suffering she could not face. What had been found of the poor men who had perished had been brought home; there had been a great military funeral for them; their names were inscribed for ever on the roll of honour. In time, when the political situation changed, an effort would be made to avenge their death, no doubt; for every man who had been murdered a hundred would be slain, or more, if possible, till even a Scythian might feel satisfied that their angry spirits were appeased by blood. Angela knew nothing of all this, for she never left the house except to go to early mass every day, and Madame Bernard never spoke of the dead man nor of the lost expedition.

When the governess came home, a little after sunset, Angela was still sitting before the picture, her chin resting on her hand and her elbow on her knee as she leaned forward to see better in the failing light. The girl turned her head with a bright smile, and Madame Bernard started in surprise when she saw the portrait.

'It is he!' she cried. 'It is he, to the very life!'

'Yes,' Angela answered softly, 'it is Giovanni. He has been telling me that I must do my part, as he did his. He is waiting for me, but I cannot go to him till my share is done.'

She was gazing at the face again, while Madame

Bernard looked from it to her in undisguised astonishment.

'I do not understand, my dear,' she said very gently. 'Who has brought you this wonderful picture?'

She hardly expected an explanation, and she guessed that the portrait was Durand's work, for few living painters could have made such a likeness, and none would have painted it in that way, which was especially his own. To her surprise Angela turned on her chair without rising, and told her just what had happened, since he had come in early in the afternoon bringing the picture with him. When she had finished she turned to it again, as if there were nothing more to be said, and at that moment Coco began to talk in a tone that made further conversation impossible. Madame Bernard took him on her hand and disappeared with him.

When she came back, Angela was standing on a chair holding up the portrait with both hands and trying to hang it by the inner edge of the frame on an old nail she had found already driven into the wall. Madame Bernard at once began to help her, as if not at all surprised at her sudden energy, though it seemed nothing less than miraculous.

They succeeded at last, and both got down from their chairs and drew back two steps to judge of the effect.

'It is a little too high,' Angela said thoughtfully. 'To-morrow I will get a cord and two rings to screw into the frame at the back, and then we will hang it just as it should be.'

'Perhaps we could put it in a better light,' Madame Bernard suggested. 'The room is so dark now that one cannot judge of that.'

'He must be where he can see me,' Angela said.

Her friend looked puzzled, and the young girl smiled again, quite naturally.

'I am not dreaming,' she said, as if answering a question not spoken. 'I do not mean that the picture can really see, any more than I believe that what they call "miraculous images" of saints are the saints themselves! But when I see the eyes of the portrait looking straight at me, I feel that he himself must see me, from where he is; and he will see me do my part, as he has done his. At least, I hope I may.'

She went to her own room, and Madame Bernard followed her to light the little lamp for her as she had always done of late. But to-day Angela insisted on doing it herself.

'You must not wait on me any more,' said the girl. 'I have been very idle for weeks, but I did not understand, and you will forgive me, because you are so good and kind.'

'You are a little angel, my dear!' cried Madame Bernard, much affected. 'They did right to name you Angela!'

But Angela shook her head, as she put the paper shade over the cheap lamp, and then went to the window to close the inner shutters before drawing the chintz curtains.

'I have been a very useless little angel,' she answered,

'and I am sorry for it. But I mean to do better now, and you will help me, won't you?'

'That is all I ask! But to tell the truth, I was discouraged to-day, and I have been to ask the advice of a very good man. There! I have told you, and I am glad of it, because I hate secrets! He has promised to come and see you, and talk to you, but now that you are yourself again ——' She stopped, as if embarrassed.

'Who is he?' asked Angela with a shade of distrust. 'A priest?'

'Please do not be angry!' Madame Bernard began to repent of what she had done. 'I was so much distressed — I felt that you were slipping out of the world day by day, just dying of a broken heart, so I went to see him this afternoon.'

'I am not going to die,' Angela said confidently. 'Who is he? I think I know at last what I must do, without the advice of a priest. But tell me who he is.'

'He is such a good man, my dear — Monsignor Saracinesca.'

'That is different,' Angela said, changing her tone at once. 'I shall be very glad to see Monsignor Saracinesca. He is a real saint, if there is one living.'

CHAPTER VII

THERE is a religious house in Rome, beyond the Tiber and not far from Porta Portese, which I will call the Convent of the White Sisters of Santa Giovanna d' Aza. Their order is a branch of a great and ancient one, though it has not had a separate existence a very long time. The convent contains one of the best private hospitals in Italy, and the Sisters also go out as trained nurses, like those of several other orders. But they do something more, which the others do not; for almost every year two or three, or even four of them go out to the Far East to work in the leper hospitals which missionaries have established in Rangoon and elsewhere; and a good many have gone in the last ten years, but few will ever return.

The convent is much larger than any one would suppose who judged merely from the uninteresting stuccoed wall which faces the quiet street, and in which there are a few plain windows without shutters and a large wooden door, painted a dull green. This door, which is the main entrance, is opened and shut by the portress as often as a hundred times a day and more; but when it is open there is nothing to be seen within but a dark vestibule paved with flagstones; and the portress's wooden face is no more prepossessing than the wall itself. If

any one asks her a question, she answers civilly in a businesslike tone, with a hard foreign accent, for she is the widow of one of the Swiss Guards at the Vatican; but she is naturally silent, stolid, mechanical, and trustworthy. She is a lay sister and is called Sister Anna, and she lives in a small room on the left of the vestibule, as you go in, five steps above the stone pavement. She is very rarely relieved from her duties for a few hours at a time, and all the patients must pass her when they enter or leave the house, as well as the doctors, and the visitors whose smart carriages and motor cars often stand waiting in the narrow street. Fifty times a day, perhaps, the door-bell rings and Sister Anna deliberately flaps down the five steps in her heavily-soled slippers to admit one person or another, and fifty times, again, she flaps down to let them out again. The reason why she does not go mad or become an imbecile is that she is Swiss. That, at least, is how it strikes the celebrated surgeon, Professor Pieri, who is at the convent very often because he has many of his patients brought there to be operated on and nursed.

The truth is that the hospital is a thoroughly modern one, which has been built as an extension of buildings that date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is managed on soundly scientific principles, without the least fuss, or any 'board of trustees' or 'committee of management,' or any of that cumbrous administration which makes so many public hospitals as intricate as labyrinths, only to be threaded with a clue of red tape, and proportionately unpractical.

There is a still and sunny garden within, surrounded by a wide and dry cloister, above which the ancient building rises only one story on the three sides of the square; but on the fourth side, which looks towards the sun at noon, there are three stories, which have been built lately, and the hospital wards are in that wing, one above the other. On the opposite side, a door opens from the cloister to the choir of the church, which has also an outer entrance from the street, now rarely used; for the chaplain comes and goes through the cloister, the vestibule, and the green door where the portress is.

Beyond her lodge there is a wide hall, with clerestory windows and glass doors opening to the cloister and the garden; and from this hall the hospital itself is reached by a passage through which all the patients are taken. The Mother Superior's rooms are those above the cloister on the further side of the garden, and have three beautiful thirteenth century windows divided by pairs of slender columns, so that each window has two little arches.

In the middle of the garden there is an old well with three arches of carved stone that spring from three pillars and meet above the centre of the well-head, and the double iron chain runs over a wheel, and has two wrought copper buckets, one at each end of it; but the water is now used only for watering the flowers. There are stone seats round the well, too, on which three old nuns often sit and sun themselves on fine days. They are the last of the Sisters of the old time, when there was no hospital and no training school, and the nuns used to do anything in the way of nursing that was asked of

them by rich or poor, with a good heart and a laudable intention, but without even the simplest elements of modern prophylaxis, because it had not been invented then. For that has all been discovered quite recently, as we older men can remember only too well.

There are many roses in the garden, and where there is most sun there is a large bed of carnations, but not of the finer sorts; they are just plain red and white ones, that fill the air with a scent of warm cloves on still mornings in the late spring, when it is beginning to be hot. But if this description has seemed tedious, you must know that Angela lived in the convent and worked there for five whole years after Giovanni was lost in Africa; so that it was needful to say something about her surroundings.

An accomplished psychologist would easily fill a volume with the history of Angela's soul from the day on which she learned the bad news till the morning when she made her profession and took the final vows of her order in the little convent church. But one great objection to psychological analysis in novels seems to be that the writer never gets beyond analysing what he believes that he himself would have felt if placed in the 'situation' he has invented for his hero or heroine. Thus analysed, Angela Chiaromonte would not have known herself, any more than those who knew her best, such as Madame Bernard and her aunt the Princess, would have recognised her. I shall not try to 'factorise' the result represented by her state of mind from time to time, still less shall I employ a mathematical process to prove

that the ratio of dx to dy is twice x, the change in Angela at any moment of her moral growth.

What has happened must be logical, just because it has happened; if we do not understand the logic, that may or may not be the worse for us, but the facts remain.

It is easy, too, to talk of a 'vocation' and to lay down the law regarding it, in order to say that such and such a woman acted wisely in entering a religious order, or that such another made a mistake. The fact that there is no such law is itself the reason why neither a man nor a woman is permitted nowadays to take permanent vows until after a considerable period of probation, first as a 'postulant' and then as a novice.

For my own part, when Angela Chiaromonte left Madame Bernard's pleasant rooms in Trastevere and went into the convent hospital of Santa Giovanna d'Aza through the green door, I do not believe that she had the very smallest intention of becoming a nun, nor that she felt anything like what devout persons call a 'vocation.' It was not to disappear from the world for ever that she went there, and it was not in order to be alone with her sorrow, though that would have been a natural and human impulse; nor was it because she felt herself drawn to an existence of asceticism and mystic meditation.

The prospect of work was what attracted her. She was a perfectly healthy-minded girl, and though she might never cease to mourn the man she had loved, it was to be foreseen that in all other respects she might recover entirely from the terrible shock and live out a

normal life. Under ordinary circumstances that is what would have happened; she would have gone back to the world after a time, outwardly the same, though inwardly changed in so far as all possibilities of love and marriage were concerned; she would have lived in society, year after year, growing old gracefully and tenderly, as some unmarried women do whose stories we never knew or have forgotten, but whose hearts are far away, watching for the great To-morrow, beside a dead man's grave, or praying before an altar whence the god has departed. They are women whom we never call 'old maids,' perhaps because we feel that in memory they are sharing their lives with a well-loved companion whom we cannot see. That might have been Angela's future.

But a brutal fact put such a possibility out of the question. She was a destitute orphan, living on the charity of her former governess, whereas her nature was independent, brave, and self-reliant. When she rose above the wave that had overwhelmed her, and opened her eyes and found her senses again, her instinct was to strike out for herself, and though she talked with Monsignor Saracinesca again and again, she had really made up her mind after her first conversation with him. She saw that she must work for her living, but at the same time she longed to devote her life to some good work for Giovanni's sake. The churchman told her that if she could learn to nurse the sick, she might accomplish both ends.

He never suggested that she should become a nun, or take upon herself any permanent obligation. He

had seen much of human nature; the girl was very young, and perhaps he underrated the strength of her love for the dead man, and thought that she might yet marry happily and live a normal woman's life. But there was no reason why she should not become a trained nurse in the meantime, and there was room for her in the nuns' hospital of Saint Joan of Aza, an institution which owes its first beginnings and much of its present success to the protection of the Saracinesca family, and more particularly to the Princess herself, the beautiful Donna Corona of other days, and to her second son, Monsignor Ippolito. The hospital was always in need of young nurses, especially since a good many of the older ones were going to the Far East, and when there was a choice the Mother Superior gave the preference to applicants from the better classes.

The matter was therefore settled without difficulty, and Angela was soon installed in the tiny room which remained her cell for years afterwards. It contained a narrow iron bedstead, and during the day a small brass cross always lay on the white coverlet; there was a chest of drawers, a minute table on which stood an American nickeled alarum clock; there was one rush-bottomed chair, and the only window looked westwards over the low city wall towards Monteverde, where the powder magazine used to stand before it was blown up. The window was latticed half-way up, which did not hinder Angela from seeing the view when she had time to look at it.

She wore a plain grey frock at first, but when she was

in the wards it was quite covered by the wide white cotton garment which all the nurses wore when on duty. Occasionally Madame Bernard came and took her for a walk, and sometimes she went out on an errand with one of the nuns; but she did not care very much for that, possibly because she was not under any restraint. The beautiful enclosed garden was wide and sunny, and she could generally be alone there; when the weather was fine she could wander about between the beds of roses and carnations or sit on a bench, and if it rained she could walk up and down under the cloisters. The three old nuns who came out to sun themselves paid no attention to her, beyond nodding rather shakily when she bent her head to them in respectful salutation. They had seen more than a hundred girls enter the convent, to work and grow old like themselves, and one more neither made any difference to them nor possessed for them the least interest. That strange petrifaction had begun in them which overtakes all very old monks and nuns who have never had very active minds. From doing the same things, with no appreciable variation, at the same hours for fifty, sixty, and even seventy years, they become so perfectly mechanical that their bodies are always in one of a limited number of attitudes, less and less pronounced as great age advances, till they at last cease to move at all and die, as the hands of a clock stop when it has run down.

But the three old nuns belonged to a past generation, and it was not probable that the younger Sisters would ever be like them. The Mother Superior was a small

and active woman, with quick black eyes, a determined mouth, and a strangely pale face. She seemed to be incapable of being tired. Among themselves the novices called her the little white volcano. When the one who had invented the epithet repeated it to Monsignor Saracinesca in confession, and he gently told her that it was wrong to speak disrespectfully of her superior, she rather pertly asked him whether any one who lived under a volcano could fail to 'respect' it; whereat he shook his head gravely inside the confessional, but his spiritual mouth twitched with amusement, in spite of himself. The four novices were inclined to distrust Angela at first, however, as she was not even a postulant, and it was not till she became one of themselves that she was initiated into their language.

It was not long before this took place, however. From the first, she showed a most unusual aptitude in learning the mechanical part of her profession, and her extraordinary memory made it easy for her to remember the lectures which were given for the nurses three times a week, generally by the house surgeon, but occasionally by the great Doctor Pieri, who had been a pupil of Basini of Padua and was a professor in the University of Rome. He showed especial interest in Angela, and the pert little novice wickedly suggested that he was falling in love with her; but the truth was that he at once distinguished in her the natural gifts which were soon to make her the most valuable nurse at his disposal.

The Mother Superior expected that she would become vain and gave her some energetic lectures on the evils of

conceit. There was a sort of fury of good about the pale woman that carried everything before it. She was just, but her righteous anger was a ready firebrand, and when it burst into flame, as often happened, her eloquence was extraordinary. Her face might have been carved out of white ice, but her eyes glowed like coals and her words came low, quick, and clear, and wonderfully to the point. As a girl, her temper had been terrific, and had estranged her from her own family; but her unconquerable will had forged it into a weapon that never failed her in a just cause and was never drawn in an unjust one. Monsignor Saracinesca sometimes thought that Saint Paul must have had the same kind of fiery and fearless temperament.

It sometimes outran facts, if it always obeyed her intention, as happened one day when she privately gave Angela a sermon on vanity which would have made the other novices tremble at the time and feel very uncomfortable for several days afterwards. When she had wound up her peroration and finished, she drew two or three fierce little breaths and scrutinised the young girl's face; but to her surprise it had not changed in the least. The clear young eyes were as steady and quiet as ever; if they expressed anything, it was a quiet admiration which the older woman had not hitherto roused in the younger members of her community.

'Pray for me, Mother,' Angela said, 'and I will try to be less vain.'

The other looked at her again very keenly, and then, instead of answering, asked a question.

'Why do you wish to be a nun?'

Angela had lately asked herself the same thing, but she replied with some diffidence:

'If I can do a little good, by working very hard all my life, I hope that it may be allowed to help the soul of a person who died suddenly.'

The Mother Superior's white face softened a little.

'That is a good intention,' she said. 'If it is sincere and lasting, you will be a good nun. You may begin your noviciate on Sunday if you have made up your mind.'

'I am ready.'

'Very well. I have only one piece of advice to give you, and perhaps I shall remind you of it often, for it was given to me very late, and I should have been the better for it. Try to remember what I tell you.'

'I will remember, Mother.'

'It is this. Count your failures but not your successes. You cannot surprise God by the amount of good you do. There are girls who enter upon the noviciate just as hard-working students go up for an examination, hoping to astonish their examiners by the amount they know. That is well enough at the university, but it is all wrong in religion. Work how you will, you cannot be perfect, and, if you were, you could only be what God made man before sin came. Each student is trying to beat all the others, and one succeeds. We are not trying to outdo each other; there are no marks in our examination and there is no competition. We are working together to save life in a world where millions die for want of care. To do less than the best we can is failure, for each of us,

and the best we can all do together is very little compared with all there is to be done. Faith, Hope, and Charity are all we have to help us, all we can ask of Heaven. Believe, hope, and help others while you live, and all will go well hereafter, never fear! Not to help, not to believe, not to hope, even during one moment, is to fail in that moment. Where the sum is light, it is easy to count the dark places, but not the light itself. That is what I mean, my daughter, when I say, keep account of your failures but not of your successes. Try to remember it.'

'Indeed I will,' Angela answered.

She went back to her work, and the Mother Superior's words thereafter became the rule of her life; but she was not sent for again to listen to a lecture on vanity, and the small White Volcano was inclined to think that it had made a mistake in breaking out, and inwardly offered a conditional apology.

Angela worked hard, and made such progress that before the two years of her noviciate were over Doctor Pieri said openly that she was the best surgical nurse in the hospital, and one of the best for ordinary illnesses, considering how limited her experience had been. The nursing of wounds is more mechanical than the nursing of a fever, for instance, and can be sooner learned by a beginner, where the surgeon himself is always at hand. On the other hand, the value of surgical nursing depends on relative perfection of detail and rigorous adherence to the set rules of prophylaxis, whereas other nursing often requires that judgment which only experience can

give. Surgery is a fine art that has reached a high degree of development in the treatment of bones, about which good surgeons are generally right. A great deal of noise is made over surgeons' occasional mistakes, which are advertised by their detractors, but we hear little of their steady and almost constant success. Medicine, on the other hand, must very often proceed by guesswork; but for that very reason it covers up its defects more anxiously, and is more inclined to talk loudly of its victories. Every great physician admits that a good deal of his science is psychological: and psychology deals with the unknown, or with what is only partially knowable. A mathematician may smile and answer that 'infinity' is much more than partially 'unknowable,' but that, by using it, the differential calculus gives results of most amazing accuracy, and is such a simple affair that, if its mere name did not inspire terror, any fourth-form schoolboy could easily be made to understand it, and even taught to use it. What we call the soul may be infinite or infinitesimal, or finite, or it may be the Hegelian Nothing, which is Pure Being under another name; whatever it is, our acquaintance with it is not knowledge of it, since whatever we can find out about it is based on the Criticism exercised by Pure Reason and not on experience; and the information which Pure Reason gives us about the soul is not categorical but antinomial; and by the time medicine gets into these transcendental regions, consciously or unconsciously, it ceases to be of much practical use in curing 'pernicious anaemia' or any similarly obscure disease.

All this digression only explains why Angela was a better nurse in surgical cases than in ordinary illnesses after she had been two years in training; but that circumstance is connected with what happened to her later, as will be clear in due time.

In most respects she changed very little, so far as any one could see. No one in the convent knew how she hoped against all reason, during those two years, that Giovanni might yet be heard of, though there was not the least ground for supposing that he could have escaped when all the others had perished; and indeed, while she still hoped, she felt that it was very foolish, and when she had a long talk with Monsignor Saracinesca before taking the veil, she did not even speak of such a possibility.

She had long ago decided that she would take the veil at the expiration of the two years, but she wished to define her position clearly to the three persons whom she cared for and respected most. These were Madame Bernard, Monsignor Saracinesca, and the Mother Superior, whose three characters were as different as it would have been possible to pick out amongst the acquaintance of a lifetime.

Angela asked permission to go with Madame Bernard to the cemetery of San Lorenzo, where a monument marked the grave of those who had fallen in the expedition. It was a large square pillar of dark marble, surmounted by a simple bronze cross. On the four sides there were bronze tablets, on which were engraved the names of the officers and men, and that of Giovanni

Severi was second, for he had been the second in command.

No one was near and Angela knelt down upon the lowest of the three steps that formed the base. After a moment Madame Bernard knelt beside her. The novice's eyes were fixed on the bronze tablet and her lips did not move. Her companion watched her furtively, expecting to see some sign of profound emotion, or of grief controlled, or at least the shadow of a quiet sadness. But there was nothing, and after two or three minutes Angela rose deliberately, went up the remaining steps, and pressed her lips upon the first letters of Giovanni's name. She turned and descended the steps with a serene expression, as Madame Bernard got up from her knees.

'Death was jealous of me,' Angela said.

She had never heard of Erinna; she did not know that a maiden poetess had made almost those very words immortal in one lovely broken line that has come down to us from five and twenty centuries ago. In the Everlasting Return they fell again from a maiden's lips, but they roused no response; Madame Bernard took them for a bit of girlish sentiment, and scarcely heeded them, while she wondered at Angela's strangely calm manner.

They walked back slowly along the straight way between the tombs.

'I loved him living and I love him dead,' said the young novice slowly. 'He cannot come back to me, but some day I may go to him.'

'Yes,' answered Madame Bernard without conviction.

The next world had always seemed very vague to her; and besides, poor Giovanni had been a soldier, and she knew something of military men, and wondered where they went when they died.

'You are a very good woman,' Angela continued, following her own train of thought; 'do you think it is wrong for a nun to love a dead man?'

'Dear me!' exclaimed the little Frenchwoman in some surprise. 'How can one love a man who is dead? It is impossible; consequently it is not wrong!'

Angela looked at her quickly and then walked on.

'There is no such thing as death,' she said.

It was Filmore Durand's odd speech that had come back to her often during two years; when she repeated it to herself she saw his portrait of Giovanni, which still hung in Madame Bernard's sitting-room, and presently it was not a picture seen in memory, but Giovanni himself.

Madame Bernard shrugged her shoulders and smiled vaguely.

'Death is a fact,' she said prosaically. 'It is the reason why we cannot live for ever!'

The reason was not convincing to Angela, but as she saw no chance of being understood, she went back to the starting-point.

'Then you do not think it can possibly be wrong for a nun to love some one who is dead?' she asked, her tone turning the statement into a question.

'Of course not!' cried the governess almost impatiently. 'You might as well think yourself in love with his tombstone and then fancy it a sin!'

So one of Angela's three friends had answered her question very definitely. The answer was not worthless, because Madame Bernard was a very honest, matter-of-fact woman; on the contrary, it represented a practical opinion, and that is always worth having, though the view it defines may be limited. Angela did not try to explain further what she had meant, and Madame Bernard always avoided subjects she could not understand. The two chatted pleasantly about other things as they returned to the convent, and the little Frenchwoman trotted contentedly back to her lodgings, feeling that the person she loved best in the world was certain to turn out a very good and happy nun.

Angela was not yet so sure of this, and she took the first opportunity of consulting Monsignor Saracinesca. They sat and talked together on one of the stone seats in the cloistered garden. He is a tall, thin man, with a thoughtful face and a quiet manner. In his youth he was once entangled in the quarrels of a Sicilian family, as I have narrated elsewhere, and behaved with great heroism. After that, he laboured for many years as a simple parish priest in a fever-plagued district, and he only consented to return to Rome when he realised that his health was gravely impaired.

Angela put her question with her usual directness and watched his face. He knew her story, so that there was nothing to explain.

'Is it wrong to love him still?' she asked.

But Monsignor Ippolito did not speak until his silence

had lasted so long that Angela was a little frightened; not that he had any real doubt as to her intention, but because it was his duty to examine such a case of conscience in all its aspects.

'What does your own instinct tell you?' he asked at last.

'That it will not be wrong,' Angela answered with conviction. 'But I may be mistaken. That is why I come to you for advice.'

Again the churchman mused in silence for a while.

'I will tell you what I think,' he said, when he had made up his mind. 'There is a condition, which depends only on yourself, and of which you are the only judge. You ask my advice, but I can only show you how to ask it of your own heart. If your love for the man who is gone looks forward, prays and hopes, it will help you; if it looks back with tears for what might have been and with longing for what can never be, it will hinder you. More than that I cannot say.'

'I look forward,' Angela answered confidently. 'I pray and I hope.'

'If you are sure of that, you are safe,' said Monsignor Saracinesca. 'No one but yourself can know.'

'I began to work here hoping and praying that if I could do any good at all it might help him, wherever he is,' Angela went on. 'That is the only vocation I ever felt, and now I wish to take the veil because I think that as a professed nun I may be able to use better what little I have learned in two years and a half than if I stay on as a lay sister. It is not for myself, except in so far as I

know that the only way to help him is to do my best here. As I hope that God may be merciful to him, so I hope that God will accept my work, my prayers, and my faith.'

The prelate looked at the delicate face and earnest eyes, and the quietly spoken words satisfied him and a little more. There could be nothing earthly in such love as that, he was sure, and such simple faith would not be disappointed. It was not the first time in his experience as a priest that he had known and talked with a woman from whom sudden death had wrenched the man she loved, or whom inevitable circumstances had divided from him beyond all hope of reunion; but he had never heard one speak just as Angela spoke, nor seen that look in another face. He was convinced, and felt that he could say nothing against her intention.

But she herself was not absolutely sure even then, and she went to the Mother Superior that evening to ask her question for the last time. The Mother was seated at her writing-table, and one strong electric lamp shed its vivid light from under a perfectly dark shade upon the papers that lay under her hand and scattered before her — bills, household accounts, doctors' and nurses' reports, opened telegrams, humble-looking letters written on ruled paper and smart notes in fashionable handwritings. People who imagine that the Mother Superior of a nursing order which has branches in many parts of the world spends her time in meditation and prayer are much mistaken.

'Sit down,' said the small white volcano, without

looking up or lifting her thin forefinger from the column of figures she was checking.

The room would have been very dark but for the light which the white paper reflected upwards upon the nun's whiter face, and into the dark air. Angela sat down at a distance as she was bidden, and waited some minutes, till the Mother Superior had set her initials at the foot of the sheet with a blue pencil, and raised her face to peer into the gloom.

'Who is it?' she asked in a businesslike tone, still dazzled by the light.

'I am Angela, Mother. May I ask you a question?'

'Yes.'

The voice had changed even in that single word, and was kind and encouraging.

'Two years ago, before I became a novice, you asked me why I wanted to be a nun, Mother. You thought my intention was good. Now that there is still time before I make my profession, I have come to ask you once again what you think.'

'So far as I know, I think you can be a good nun,' answered the Mother Superior without waiting to hear more, for she never wasted time if she could possibly help it.

Angela understood her and told her story quickly and clearly, without a quiver or an inflection of pain in her voice. It was necessary, for the Mother did not know it all, and listened with concentrated attention. But before it was ended she had made up her mind what to say.

'My dear child,' said she, 'I am not your confessor!

And besides, I am prejudiced, for you are a good nurse and I need you and wish you to stay. Do you feel that there is any reason why you should be less conscientious than you have been so far, if you promise to go on working with us as long as you live?'

'No,' Angela answered.

'Or that there is any reason why you should have less faith in God, less hope of heaven, or less charity towards your fellow-creatures if you promise to give your whole life to God, in nursing those who suffer, with the hope of salvation hereafter?'

'No, I do not feel that there can be any reason.'

'Then do not torment yourself with any more questions, for life is too short! To throw away time is to waste good, and save evil. Believe always, and then work with all your might! Work, work, work! Work done for God's sake is prayer to God, and a thousand hours on your knees are not worth as much as one night spent in helping a man to live — or to die — when you are so tired that you can hardly stand, and every bone in your body aches, and you are half-starved too! Work for every one who needs help, spare every one but yourself, think of every one before yourself. It is easy to do less than your best, it is impossible to do more, and yet you must try to do more, always more, till the end! That should be a nun's life.'

The Mother Superior had led that life till it was little less than a miracle that she was still alive herself, and altogether a wonder that her fiery energy had not eaten up the small frail earthly part of her long ago.

'But it must not be for the sake of the end,' she went on, before Angela could speak, 'else you will be working only for the hope of rest, and you will try to kill yourself with work, to rest the sooner! You must think of what you are doing because it is for others, not for what it will bring you by and by, God willing. Pray to live long and to do much more before you die, if it be good; for there is no end of the sickness and suffering and pain in this world; but few are willing to help, and fewer still know how!'

She was silent, but her eyes were speaking still as Angela saw them looking at her over the shaded light, her pale features illuminated only by the soft reflection from the paper on the table.

The young girl felt a deep and affectionate admiration for her, and resolved never to forget the brave words, but to treasure them with those others spoken two years ago: 'Count your failures but not your successes.'

She rose to take her leave, and, standing before the writing-table, with each hand hidden in the opposite sleeve, she bent her head respectfully.

'Thank you, Mother,' she said.

The nun nodded gravely, still looking at her, but said nothing more, and Angela left the room, shutting the door without noise. The Mother Superior did not go back to her accounts at once, though her hand mechanically drew the next sheet from the pile, so that it lay ready before her. She was thinking of her own beginnings, more than twenty years ago, and comparing her own ardent nature with what she knew of Angela's:

and then, out of her great experience of character, a doubt arose and troubled her strangely, though she opposed it as if it had been a temptation to injustice, or at least to ungenerous thinking. It was a suspicion that such marvellous calm as this novice showed could not be all real; that there was something not quite explicable about her perfect submission, humility, and obedience; that under the saintly exterior a fire might be smouldering which would break out irresistibly some day, and not for good.

The woman who had been tried doubted the untried novice. Perhaps it was nothing more than that, and natural enough; but it was very disturbing, because she also felt herself strongly attached to Angela, and to suspect her seemed not only unfair, but disloyal. Yet it was the bounden duty of the Mother to study the characters of all who lived under her authority and direction, and to forestall their possible shortcomings by a warning, an admonition, or an encouraging word, as the case might be.

She had done what she could, but she was dissatisfied with herself; and at the very moment when Angela was inwardly repeating her stirring words and committing them to memory for her lifetime, the woman who had spoken them was tormented by the thought that she had not said half enough, or still worse, that she had perhaps made a mistake altogether. For the first time since she had fought her first great battle with herself, she had the sensation of being near a mysterious force of nature which she did not understand; but she had

been twenty years younger then, and the present issue was not to depend on her own strength but on another's, and it involved the salvation of another's soul.

It was long before she bent over the columns of figures again, yet she did not reproach herself with having wasted time. The first of all her many duties, and the most arduous, was to think for others; to work for them was a hundred times easier and was rest and refreshment by contrast.

Angela would have been very much surprised if she could have known what was passing in the Mother Superior's mind, while she herself felt nothing but relief and satisfaction because her decision had now become irrevocable. If she had been bidden to wait another year, she would have waited patiently and without a murmur, because she could not be satisfied with anything less than apparent certainty; but instead, she had been encouraged to take the final step, after which there could be no return.

That was the inevitable. Human destiny is most tragic when the men and women concerned are doing their very utmost to act bravely and uprightly, while each is in reality bringing calamity on the other.

Acting on the only evidence she had a right to trust, the Mother Superior knew that she would not be justified in hindering Angela from taking the veil. Few had ever done so well in the noviciate, none had ever done better, and her natural talent for the profession of nursing was altogether unusual. There had never been one like her in the hospital. As for her character, she

seemed to have no vanity, no jealousy, no temper, no moodiness. The Mother had never known such an even and well-balanced disposition as hers. Would it have been wise to keep her back longer, because she seemed too perfect? Would it have been just? Would it not, indeed, have been very wrong to risk discouraging her, now that she was quite ready? She was almost twenty-one years old and had taken no step hastily. More than two years and a half had passed since she had entered the convent, and in all that time no one had been able to detect the smallest fault in her, either of weakness or of hastiness, still less of anything like the pride she might actually have felt in her superiority. To keep her back now would be to accuse perfection of being imperfect; it would be as irrational as to call excellence a failing. More than that, it would have a bad effect on the whole community, a danger which could not be overlooked.

Three years later, the Mother understood the warning doubt that had assailed her; and when a precious life was in the balance she put herself on trial before her judging conscience and the witness of her memory. But though the judge was severe and the testimony unerring, they acquitted her of all blame, and told her that she had acted for the best, according to her light, on that memorable evening.

Within less than a month Angela took the veil in the convent church, and thenceforth she was Sister Giovanna, for that was the name she chose.

CHAPTER VIII

FIVE years after Giovanni Severi had left Rome to join the ill-fated expedition in Africa, his brother Ugo obtained his captaincy and at the same time was placed in charge of the powder magazine at Monteverde, which Sister Giovanna could see in the distance from her latticed window. The post was of considerable importance, but was not coveted because it required the officer who held it to live at a considerable distance from the city, with no means of getting into town which he could not provide for himself; for there is no tramway leading down the right bank of the Tiber. The magazine was actually guarded by a small detachment of artillery under two subalterns who took the night duty by turns, and both officers and men were relieved at regular intervals by others; but the captain in command held his post permanently and lived in a little house by himself, a stone's throw from the gate of the large walled enclosure in which the low buildings stood. For some time it had been intended to build a small residence for the officer in charge, but this had not been begun at the date from which I now take up my story.

The neighbourhood is a lonely one, but there are farm-houses scattered about at varying distances from the high-road which follows the river, mostly in the

neighbourhood of the hill that bears the name of Monteverde and seems to have been the site of a villa in which Julius Cæsar entertained Cleopatra.

As every one will understand, Ugo Severi's duties consisted in keeping an account of the ammunition and explosives deposited in the vaults of the magazine and in exercising the utmost vigilance against fire and other accidents. The rule against smoking, for instance, did not apply outside the enclosure, but Ugo gave up cigarettes, even in his own house, as soon as he was appointed to the post, and took care that every one should know that he had done so.

He was a hard-working, hard-reading, rather melancholic man who had never cared much for society and preferred solitude to a club; a fair man, with the face of a student and not over robust, but nevertheless energetic and determined where his duty was concerned. He lived alone in the little house, with his orderly, a clever Sicilian, who cooked for him; a peasant woman from a neighbouring farm-house came every morning to sweep the rooms, make the two beds, and scrub the two stone steps before the door and clean the kitchen.

The house was like hundreds of other little houses in the Campagna. On the ground floor there was a cross-vaulted hall where the Captain transacted business and received the reports of the watch; there was a tiny kitchen also, a stable at the back for two horses, and a narrow chamber adjoining it, in which Pica, the orderly, slept. Upstairs there was only one story, consisting of a large room with a loggia looking across the river

towards San Paolo, a bedroom of moderate dimensions, and a dressing-room.

The place was more luxuriously furnished than might have been expected, for though Captain Ugo was not a rich man, he was by no means dependent on his pay. General Severi had lived to retrieve a part of his fortune, and had died rather suddenly of heart-failure after a bad attack of influenza, leaving his property to be divided equally between his two surviving sons and their sister. The latter had married away from Rome, and Ugo's younger brother was in the navy, so that he was now the only member of his family left in Rome.

He was a man of taste and reading, who had entered the army to please his father and would have left it on the latter's death if he had not been persuaded by his superiors that he had a brilliant career before him and might be a general at fifty, if he stuck to the service. He had answered that he would do so if he might have some post of trust in which he would have time for study; the command of the magazine at Monteverde was vacant just then, and as no more influential person wanted to live in such a dull place, he got it.

Yet his house was not much more than a mile from the gate, by a good high-road; whence it is clear that his solitude was a matter of choice and not of necessity. He had few friends, however, and none who showed any inclination to come and see him, though his acquaintances were numerous; for he had been rather popular in society when a young subaltern, and had been welcome wherever his elder brother Giovanni took him.

Giovanni had been very reticent about his affairs, even with his own family, and during that last winter in Rome, when he had fallen in love with Angela Chiaromonte, Ugo had been stationed in Pavia and had known nothing of the affair. Ugo had a vague recollection that Giovanni was supposed to have been unduly devoted to the gay Marchesa del Prato when he had been a mere stripling of a sub-lieutenant, fresh from the Military Academy and barely twenty, though the Marchesa had been well over thirty, even then. Ugo had been introduced to her long afterwards, when she was the Princess Chiaromonte, and she had shown that she liked him, and had asked him to a dance, to which he had not gone simply because he had given up dancing.

The Princess, however, had misunderstood his reason for not accepting her invitation and had supposed that he kept away because he had known Angela's story and resented, for his brother's sake, the treatment the girl had received. In an hour of idleness, it now occurred to her that she might find out whether she had been mistaken in this.

For some one had spoken of Giovanni on the previous evening, in connection with a report that had lately reached Rome to the effect that an Italian officer, hitherto supposed to have been among the dead after the battle of Dogali, had been heard of and was living in slavery somewhere in the interior of Africa. A newspaper had made a good story of the matter, out of next to nothing, and it had been a subject of conversation during two or three days. The lady who told it to the

Princess Chiaromonte had been one of her most assiduous and intimate enemies for years, and, in order to make her uncomfortable, advanced the theory that the officer in question was no other than Giovanni Severi himself.

The Princess was not so easily disturbed, however, and smiled in her designing friend's face. The poor man was dead and buried, she said, and every one knew it. The report rested on nothing more substantial than a letter said to have been written by an English traveller and lion-hunter to one of the secretaries at the British Embassy in Washington, who was said, again, to have mentioned the fact to an Italian colleague, who had repeated it in writing to his sister, who lived somewhere in Piedmont and had spoken of it to some one else; and so on, till the story had reached the ears of a newspaper paragraph-writer who was hard up for a 'stick' of 'copy.' All this the Princess knew, or invented, and she ran off her explanation with a fluency that disconcerted her assailant.

The immediate result was that she bethought her of Ugo Severi, whom she had passed lately in her motor as he was riding leisurely along the road beyond Monteverde. She had noticed him because her chauffeur had slackened speed a little, and she had nodded to him, though it was not likely that he should recognise her face through her veil. She had thought no more about him at the time, but she now telephoned to a friend at headquarters to find out where he was living, and she soon learned that he was in charge of the magazine.

After a little reflection, she wrote him a note, recalling their acquaintance and the fact that she had known his poor brother very well. She had never seen a powder magazine, she said; would he show the one at Monteverde to her and two or three friends, next Wednesday?

Ugo answered politely that this was quite impossible without a special permission from the Commander-in-Chief or the War Office, and that he greatly regretted his inability to comply with her request. As he was a punctilious man, though he lived almost like a hermit, he took the trouble to send his orderly into the city on the following afternoon with a couple of cards to be left at the Palazzo Chiaromonte for the Prince and Princess, in accordance with Roman social custom.

A few days later a smart 'limousine' drew up to the door of Ugo's little house and a footman rang the old-fashioned bell, which went on tinkling in the distance for a long time after the rusty chain had been pulled. Ugo's Sicilian orderly opened the door at last in a leisurely way and appeared on the threshold in grey linen fatigue dress; on seeing the car and the Princess he straightened himself and saluted.

His master was riding, he said, and would not come home for an hour. The Princess wrote a message on a card, asking if Ugo would come and see her any day after five o'clock, and she wrote down the number of her telephone. She gave the card to the man, and by way of impressing its importance on him, added that she was a very old friend of the family and had known the

Captain's mother as well as the brother who had been lost in Africa. She also smiled sweetly, for the Sicilian was a handsome young man; she had a way of smiling at handsome men when she was speaking to them, especially if she wished them to remember what she said.

When the car was gone, Salvatore Pica, the orderly, shut the door and went into the hall where the telephone was. He looked at the visiting card before leaving it on the brass salver on the table, where letters and reports were placed for the Captain whenever he was out; and being an intelligent man and considerably impressed by what the Princess had told him, he promptly wrote the name, address, and telephone number in the address-book which hung by a string beside the instrument. For Ugo never telephoned himself if he could help it, and was careless about addresses, which it was Pica's business to copy and have at hand when needed.

Moreover, the Princess had represented herself as being a very old friend of the Captain's family, and Pica mentally noted the fact, because he had often wondered that his master should apparently have no intimate friends at all, though he was evidently respected and liked by his brother-officers.

When Ugo came home and dismounted at the door, Pica at once told him of the Princess's visit, repeating her message without a mistake, and adding that he had copied her name and address in the telephone-book. The Captain nodded gravely and looked at the card before he went upstairs, but said nothing to his man. Being very careful and punctilious in such matters, as I

have said, he wrote a line that evening, thanking the Princess for her kind invitation and saying that he hoped to avail himself of it some day, but that he was very busy just at present. This was true, in a sense, for he had just received an important new book in two thick volumes, which he was anxious to read without delay. The fact that it was an exhaustive history of Confucianism, and could not be considered as bearing on his professional duties, was not likely to interest the Princess.

She was not used to such rebuffs, however, and before long she made another attempt. This time she herself called up Pica and asked him at what hour the Captain could see her on a matter of importance. When the orderly delivered the message, Severi was at first inclined to make an excuse; but the Princess's persistency in trying to see him was obvious, and as he thought it possible that she might wish to ask him some question relating to Giovanni, he bade Pica answer that he would stay at home that afternoon, if it suited her convenience to come. She replied that she would appear about four o'clock.

Ugo was buried in the history of Confucianism when his man came to tell him this, and he merely nodded, but looked up quickly when Pica turned to the door.

'Shave and dress,' he said laconically, and at once began to read again.

It was the order he gave when he expected the visit of a superior officer, for as a rule Pica only shaved twice a week, and never put on a cloth tunic except when

he had leave for the afternoon and evening. The little house at Monteverde was a lonely place and the soldier did no military duty, living the life of an ordinary house servant. It was a good place, for the Captain was generous.

With an affectation of extreme punctuality, the Princess's footman rang the bell at four o'clock precisely, and almost before the distant tinkle was heard Pica opened the door wide and saluted the visitor, flattening himself against the door-post to give her plenty of room. He looked very smart in his best uniform, and she smiled and glanced at his handsome Saracen face as she passed in. He shut the door at once, leaving the footman outside.

At the same moment Captain Severi was descending the short flight of stone steps to meet her. He was not very like Giovanni, but in the half-light the Princess saw a resemblance that made her start. Ugo was less energetically built, but he wore his uniform well and there was much in his gait and the outline of his figure that recalled his brother.

The Princess took his hand almost affectionately and held it in silence for a moment while she looked into his mild blue eyes. Pica noticed her manner, which certainly confirmed what she had said about being a friend of the family.

The mere suggestion of a delicate and exotic perfume had floated into the house with her. At first it faintly recalled Indian river grass, but presently Ugo thought it reminded him of muscatel grapes, and then again of

dried rose leaves and violets. She smiled as she withdrew her hand, and spoke.

'You did not guess that a woman could be so persistent, did you?'

Ugo also smiled, but without cordiality, and then led the way upstairs. On reaching the large room, the Princess looked about her, judged the man, and at once expressed her admiration for his good sense in leading a student's life, instead of squandering his time in the futilities of society.

The Captain did not ask her what she wanted of him, but offered to make tea for her, and she saw that a little table had been set for the purpose. Everything was very simple, but looked so serviceable that she accepted, judging that she ran no risk of being poisoned. In Italy it is only society that drinks tea. It was a little early for it, but that did not matter. The water was boiling in a small copper kettle shaped like a flat sponge-cake, the tea-caddy was Japanese, and the teapot was of plain brown earthenware, but the two cups were of rare old Capodimonte and the spoons were evidently English. She noticed also that the sugar was of the 'crystallised' kind, and was in a curiously chiselled silver bowl. The Princess had a good eye for details.

'You seem to have made yourself very comfortable in your remote little house,' she laughed, with approval.

'I only hope that you may be, as long as you please to stay,' he answered, making the tea scientifically.

It was very good, and she chatted idly while she slowly drank it and nibbled a thin, crisp biscuit. When

she had finished he took her cup and offered to refill it, but she declined and leaned back comfortably in the big red leather easy-chair.

'I daresay you heard that story about an officer who is reported to be living in slavery in Africa?' she said, her tone changing and becoming very grave.

Ugo had read of it in the newspapers.

'Did it occur to you, as it did to me, that he might be Giovanni?' she asked.

It had occurred to him and he had made inquiries at the War Office, but had been told that the story had no foundation. He had expected no other answer. The Princess was silent for a moment.

'One grasps at straws,' she said presently, in a low voice.

He understood that she had really cared for his brother, and looked at her with more interest than he had hitherto shown.

'I am afraid that there is not the slightest possibility of his being alive,' he said, with a sadness in which there was also some sympathy for her.

She had hoped for an indiscreet question, which would allow her to say something more. It was of no real importance to her to know whether he bore her any grudge or not, but since she had taken so much trouble to see him she did not mean to go away without knowing the truth, and though her curiosity was a mere caprice, it was perhaps not a very unreasonable one.

'Had you seen much of him during the last months before he went to Africa?' she asked. 'I did not know

you till long after that, you know. I think you were always away?'

'I was stationed in Pavia,' the Captain answered. 'Giovanni joined the expedition at short notice and I was not able to see him before he started. I have always regretted it, for we had not met for eighteen months.'

'You were never very intimate, I suppose?' suggested the Princess.

'We were always very good friends, but after he was appointed to the Staff we saw little of each other.'

The Princess mused in silence for a few moments.

'I was very fond of him,' she said at last. 'Did he ever talk about me to you?'

'No,' Ugo answered. 'Not that I can remember.'

Their eyes met and she saw that he was telling the truth, as, in fact, he always did.

'I suppose you have heard that he was in love with my poor niece, who went into a convent after he was lost?' she said tentatively, and watching his face.

'Indeed?' He showed more interest. 'I never heard of that. Were they engaged to be married?'

'No. At least, there was no formal engagement. My brother-in-law was killed in a motor accident just at that time. Then Giovanni went to Massowah, and you know the rest. But they were very much in love with each other, and Angela was broken-hearted.'

She now knew what she had come to find out, and she did not care to rouse his curiosity as to her own share in the story, since no gossip had taken the trouble to enlighten him.

'Has she taken permanent vows?' he asked.

'Yes. Three years ago, and now it is said that she means to go out to the Rangoon Leper Hospital. I daresay you have heard that a good many nuns do that. It is almost certain death and we all feel very badly about Angela.'

'Poor girl!' exclaimed Ugo. 'She must have cared for him so much that she is tired of living. Very few of those Sisters ever come back, I believe.'

'None,' said the Princess Chiaromonte in a tone that would certainly have arrested his attention if he had known everything. 'It is the saddest thing in the world,' she went on quickly, fearing that her hatred had betrayed itself. 'To think that year after year those good women voluntarily go to certain death! And not even to save life, for lepers cannot be cured, you know. The most that can be done is to alleviate their suffering!'

She said this very well, though the words were hackneyed.

'It is heroic,' said Captain Ugo quietly.

She stayed some time longer, and he showed her the finest of his books and a number of old engravings and etchings; and these really impressed her because she knew something of their current value, which was her only standard in judging works of art. At last she showed that she was thinking of going. Women of the world generally give warning of their approaching departure, as an ocean steamer blows its horn at intervals before it starts. The Princess's voice was suddenly

colourless and what she said became more and more general, till she observed that it was really a lovely day. She looked down at her skirt critically and then glanced quickly at the walls, one after another. When you do not know what a woman is looking for in an unfamiliar drawing-room, it is a mirror to see whether her hat is straight. The Princess saw none and rose gracefully out of the deep easy-chair.

'It has been such a great pleasure to see you!' she said, the cordiality returning to her tone as soon as she was on her feet.

'I am very much obliged for your visit,' Ugo answered politely, because nothing else occurred to him to say, and he clapped his heels together with a jingle of his spurs as he took her proffered hand.

He was neither shy nor dull of comprehension where women were concerned, and he understood quite well that she had not come with the intention of making an impression on him, nor out of mere curiosity to see what Giovanni's brother was like. He knew what her reputation had been, but he did not know whether she had retired from the lists at last or still kept the field; and he cared very little, though he had sometimes reflected that whereas Balzac had written of the Woman of Thirty, the 'woman of forty' was still to be studied by a clever novelist; unless, indeed, Sophocles had made an end of her for ever when Jocasta hanged herself. One thing, however, was clear: the Princess had not sought him out with any idea of casting upon him the spell of a flirtation to make him a sort of posthumous substitute

for his brother. She had faced the light boldly several times in the course of her visit, so that he had seen the fine lines of middle age about her mouth and eyes very distinctly, and she had not made any attempt to show herself off before him, nor to lead him on with subdued confidences concerning the human affections as she had known them. He believed that she had come to find out whether he thought that Giovanni might possibly be alive or not, and he rather liked her for what seemed to him her frankness and courage, and was unconsciously flattered, as the best men may be, by her trusting him so simply.

No doubt it might be true that since the world had put up with her rather reckless behaviour for over fifteen years, her reputation would not be lost at this late date by her spending an hour at the rooms of an officer who was quartered out of town. No doubt, too, that same reputation was a coat of many colours, on which one small stain more would scarcely show at all, but she had never been in the habit of risking spots for nothing. Moreover, it is a curious fact that men are better pleased at being trusted by a clever woman who has had many adventures than when an angel of virtue places her good name under their protection: there is less irksome responsibility in playing confidant to Lady Jezebel than in being guardian to the impeccable Lucretia.

If nothing more had happened, the Princess's visit would have had little or no importance in this story; but as things turned out, the incident was one of the links in a chain of events which led to a singularly un-

expected and dramatic conclusion, as will before long clearly appear.

Fate often behaves like a big old lion, when he opens his sleepy eyes and catches a first sight of you as he lies alone, far out on the plain. He lifts his tawny head and gazes at you quietly for several seconds and then lowers it as if not caring what you do. You creep nearer, cautiously, noiselessly, and holding your breath, till some faint noise you make rouses his attention again and he takes another look at you, longer this time and much less lazy, while you stand motionless. Nevertheless, you are only a man, and not worth killing; if he is an old lion, he may have eaten a score like you, white and black, but he is not hungry just now and wants to sleep. Down goes his head again, and his eyes shut themselves for another nap. On you go, stealthily, nearer and nearer, your rifle ready in both hands. But a dry stalk of grass cracks under your foot, and almost before you can stand still he is up and glaring at you, his long tufted tail showing upright against the sky. If you move, even to lift your gun to your shoulder, he will charge; and sooner or later, move you must. Then, suddenly, he is bounding forward, by leap after leap, hurling his huge strength through the air, straight at you, and as the distance lessens you see his burning eyes with frightful distinctness. Two more such bounds as the last will do it. Take care, for within ten seconds either you or he will be dead. There is no other end possible.

Fate does not always kill, it is true; but you have not that one chance against her which your weapon gives

you against the lion, and she may maul you badly before she has done with you, even worse than the biggest cat would.

It was not Ugo Severi's fate that was waking, and that began to look towards Monteverde when Princess Chiaromonte paid him a visit. It was not even the Princess's own.

When she was gone, he went back to his history of Confucianism, and Pica got into his grey linen fatigue suit again, and carefully brushed his smart uniform before folding it and putting it away in the chest. Then he washed the tea-things, rubbed the two silver spoons with a special leather he kept for them, and shut up everything in the cupboard. After that, he opened the front door and sat down on the brick seat that ran along the front of the house. He would have liked to smoke a pipe, but Captain Ugo was very particular about that, so he took out half of a villainous-looking 'napoletano' cigar, bit off three-quarters of an inch of it, and returned the small remainder to his pocket; and after a few minutes he concluded, as usual, that a chew was far cheaper than a smoke and lasted much longer.

As the sun sank he looked across the yellow river towards Saint Paul's, and because he had been bred in sight of the sea it struck him that the distant belfry tower was very like a lighthouse, and he smiled at the thought, which has occurred to men of more cultivation than he had.

His eyes wandered to his left, and the sunset glow was on the low city walls, not a mile away, reddening the

upper story of an ancient convent beyond. His sharp eyes counted the windows mechanically, and one of them belonged to the cell of Sister Giovanna, the Dominican nun, though he did not know it; and much less did he guess that before very long he himself, and his master, and the fine lady who had come in a motor that afternoon, were all to play their parts in the nun's life. If he had known that, he would have tried to guess which window was hers.

The first bitter tang of the vile tobacco was gone out of it, and Pica thoughtfully rolled the quid over his tongue to the other side of his mouth. At that moment he was aware of a man in a little brown hat and shabby clothes who must have come round the house very quietly, from the direction of the magazine, for he was already standing still near the corner, looking at him.

'What do you want?' Pica asked rather sharply.

The man looked like a bad character, but raised his hat as he answered with a North Italian accent.

'I am a stranger,' he said. 'Can you tell me how to reach the nearest gate?'

'There is the road,' the soldier replied, pointing to it, 'and there is Rome, and the nearest gate is Porta Portese.'

'Thank you,' the man said, and went on his way.

CHAPTER IX

During the month of December the Princess Chiaromonte fell ill, much to her own surprise and that of her children, for such a thing had never happened to her since she had been a mere child and had caught the measles; but there was no mistaking the fact that she now had a bad attack of the influenza, with high fever, and her head felt very light. During the first two days, she altogether refused to stay in her room, which made matters worse; but on the third morning she yielded and stayed in bed, very miserable and furiously angry with herself. It had always been her favourite boast that she never caught cold, never had a headache, and never broke down from fatigue; and considering the exceedingly gay life she had led she certainly had some cause to be vain of her health.

Her eldest daughter and her maid took care of her that day, and her maid sat up with her during the following night, after which it became quite clear that she must have a professional nurse. The doctor insisted upon it, though the Princess herself flew into a helpless rage at the mere suggestion; and then, all at once, and before the doctor had left the room, she began to talk quite quietly about ordering baby frocks and a perambulator, though her youngest boy was already twelve

years old and went to school at the Istituto Massimo. The doctor and the maid looked at each other.

'I will telephone for one of the White Sisters,' the doctor said. 'They are the ones I am used to and I know the Mother Superior.'

It happened that the nurses of Santa Giovanna were much in demand at that time, for there was an epidemic of influenza in the city, and as they were almost all both ladies and Italians, society people preferred them to those of other orders. Three-quarters of an hour after the doctor had telephoned, one of them appeared at the Palazzo Chiaromonte, a rather stout, grave woman of forty or more, who knew her business.

She at once said, however, that she had come on emergency, but could not stay later than the evening, when another Sister would replace her; it would be her turn on the next morning to begin her week as supervising nun in the Convent hospital, a duty taken in rotation by three of the most experienced nuns, and it was absolutely necessary that she should have her night's rest before taking charge of the wards.

The Princess had fallen into a state of semi-consciousness which was neither sleep nor stupor, but partook of both, and her face was scarlet from the fever. Two or three times in the course of the afternoon, however, she was evidently aware of the nurse's presence, and she submitted without resistance to all that was done for her. The maid, who had been in the sick-room all night and all the morning, was now asleep, and the doctor had advised that the children should be kept

away from their mother altogether. When the doctor came again, about six o'clock, the nun explained her own position to him, and begged him to communicate with the Convent before leaving the palace, as the Princess should certainly not be left without proper care, even for an hour. He did what she asked, and the answer came back in the Mother Superior's own voice. She said that she was very short of nurses, and that it would be extremely inconvenient to send one, and she therefore begged of him to get a Sister from another order.

He replied very crossly that he would do nothing of the sort, that he believed in the White Sisters and meant to have a White Sister, and that a White Sister must come, and a good one; and that if it was only a matter of inconvenience, it was better that the Convent should be inconvenienced for him than that he should be disappointed; and he added so much more to the same effect, with so many emphatic repetitions, that the Mother Superior promised to break all rules and come herself within an hour if no other Sister were available. For she had a very high regard for him, in spite of his rough tone and harsh voice.

Her difficulty was a very simple one. The only nurse who was free that evening was Sister Giovanna, who had returned just before mid-day from a case that had ended badly, and she had been asleep ever since. But the Mother Superior knew how the Princess had treated her niece and robbed her of her fortune, and she could not foresee what might happen if the young nun took charge of the case. After giving her somewhat rash promise to

the doctor, she sent for her, therefore, and explained matters.

'I do not think that my aunt will recognise me,' said Sister Giovanna. 'She has never set eyes on me since I was a girl of eighteen in deep mourning. Our dress changes us very much, and I must have changed, too, in five years. Even my voice is not the same, I fancy.'

The Mother Superior looked at her keenly. She was very fond of her, but it had never occurred to her to consider whether the young Sister's appearance had altered or not. Yet her own memory for faces was good, and when she recalled the features of the slim, fair-haired girl in black whom she had first seen, and compared the recollection with the grave and almost saintly face before her, closely confined by the white wimple and gorget, and the white veil that bound the forehead low above the serious brow, she really did not believe that any one could easily recognise the Angela of other days.

'I suppose I never realise how changed we all are,' she said thoughtfully. 'But do you not think the Princess Chiaromonte may remember you when she hears your name?'

'Many Sisters have taken it,' Sister Giovanna answered. 'And, after all, what harm can there be? If she recognises me and is angry, she can only send me away, and meanwhile she will be taken care of, at least for the night. That is the main thing, Mother, and one of the Sisters will surely be free to-morrow morning.'

So the matter was settled. Sister Giovanna got her well-worn little black bag, her breviary, and her long

black cloak, and in half-an-hour she was ascending the grand staircase of the palace in which she had lived as a child.

She felt more emotion than she had expected, but no sign betrayed that she was moved, nor showed the servant who led her through the apartments and passages that she was familiar with every turn. Though she went through the great hall and her feet trod upon the very spot where the dead Knight of Malta had lain in state, not a sigh escaped her, nor one quickly-drawn breath.

She was ushered to the very room that had been her father's, and stood waiting after the servant had tapped softly at the door. The other nun came out noiselessly and pulled the door after her without quite closing it. She explained the case to Sister Giovanna, and said that the Princess seemed to be asleep again. She probably knew nothing of any relationship between the patient and Sister Giovanna; but if she remembered anything of the latter's story, it was not her business to comment on the circumstance, even mentally. Even in the nursing orders, where the real names of the Sisters may often be known to others besides the Mother Superior, the Sisters themselves scrupulously respect one another's secret, though it may be almost an open one, and never discuss the identity of a member of their community. Where nuns are cloistered, actual secrecy is preserved as far as possible, and though a Sister may sometimes talk to another about her former life, and especially of her childhood, she never mentions her family by name, even though she may be aware that the truth is known.

Sister Giovanna entered the sick-room alone, as the other nurse seemed to think that the unexpected sight of two nuns might disturb the patient. If the Princess noticed the new face, when she next opened her eyes, she made no remark and showed no surprise; so that Sister Giovanna felt quite sure of not having been recognised. There was very little light in the room, too, by the doctor's advice, and a high screen covered with old Cordova leather stood between the bed and the table on which the single shaded candle was placed.

The nun stood beside the pillow and looked long at the face of the woman who had wronged her so cruelly and shamefully. After a few seconds she could see her very distinctly in the shadow; the features were flushed and full, and strangely younger than when she had last seen them, as often happens with fair people of a certain age at the beginning of a sharp fever, when the quickened pulse sends the hot blood to the cheeks and brings back the vivid brilliancy of youth. But the experienced nurse knew that and was not surprised. After taking the temperature and doing all she could for the moment, she left the bedside and sat down to read her breviary by the light on the other side of the screen. The illness was only an attack of influenza after all, and she knew how strong her aunt had always been; there was no cause for anxiety, nor any necessity for sitting constantly within sight of the patient. Twice an hour she rose, went to the sick woman's side and gave her medicine, or drink, or merely smoothed the pillow a little, as the case might be, and then came back to the table. The Princess was

not so restless as most people are in fever, and she did not try to talk, but took whatever was given her, like a model of resignation. The delirium had left her for the present.

Reading slowly, and often meditating on what she read, Sister Giovanna did not finish the office for the day and close her book till nearly midnight. Her old watch lay on the table beside the candlestick, and her eyes were on the hands as she waited till it should be exactly twelve before taking the patient's temperature again. But it still wanted three minutes of the hour when the Princess's voice broke the profound silence. The words were spoken quietly, in a far-away tone:

'I stole it.'

Sister Giovanna started more nervously than a nurse should, and looked straight at the screen as if she could see her aunt's face through the leather. In a few seconds she heard the voice again, and though the tone was lower, the words were as distinct as if spoken close to her ear.

'I hid it on me, and left my little bag behind on purpose, because the footman would be sure to open that, to take my cigarettes. I knew he often did. It was very clever of me, was it not? He will swear that he went back for the bag and that there were no papers in it.'

It was not the first time, by many, that Sister Giovanna had heard a delirious patient tell a shameful secret that had been kept long and well. She rose with an effort, pressing one hand upon the table. It was plainly her duty to prevent any further revelations if she could,

and to forget what she had heard; for a trained nurse's standard of honour must be as high as a doctor's, since she is trusted as he is.

Yet the nun waited a moment before going round the screen, unconsciously arguing that if the patient did not speak again it would be better not to disturb her at that moment. To tell the truth, too, Sister Giovanna had not fully understood the meaning of what her aunt had said. She stood motionless during the long pause that followed the last words.

Then, without warning, the delirious woman began to laugh, vacantly and foolishly at first, and with short interruptions of silence, but then more loudly, and by degrees more continuously, till the spasms grew wild and hysterical, and bad to hear. Sister Giovanna went quickly to her and at once tried to put a stop to the attack. The Princess was rolling her head from side to side on the pillows, with her arms stretched out on each side of her and her white hands clawing at the broad hem of the sheet with all their strength, as if they must tear the fine linen to strips, and she was shrieking with uncontrollable laughter.

Sister Giovanna bent down and grasped one arm firmly with both hands.

'Control yourself!' she said in a tone of command. 'Stop laughing at once!'

The Princess shrieked again and again.

'Silence!' cried the nurse in a stern voice, and she shook the arm she held with a good deal of roughness, for she knew that there was no other way.

The delirious woman screamed once more, and then gulped several times as if she were going to sob; at last she lay quite still for a moment, gazing up into her nurse's eyes. Then a change came into her face, and she spoke in a hoarse whisper, and as if frightened.

'Are you going to refuse me absolution for taking the will?' she asked.

The question was so unexpected that Sister Giovanna did not find anything to say at once, and before any words occurred to her the Princess was speaking hurriedly and earnestly, but still in a loud whisper, which occasionally broke into a very low and trembling tone of voice.

'I did it for the best. What could that wretched girl have done with the money, even if the lawyers had proved the will good? Why did not my brother-in-law get civilly married, instead of leaving his daughter without so much as a name? There must have been a reason. Perhaps she was not really his wife's child! It was all his fault, and the will was not legal and would only have given trouble if I had let them find it! So I took it away, and burned it in my own room. What harm was there in that? It saved so many useless complications, and we had a right to the fortune! The lawyers said so! I cannot see that it was really a sin at all, Father, indeed I cannot! I have confessed it from a scruple of conscience, and you will not refuse me absolution! How can you, when I say I am sorry for it? Yes, yes, I am!' The voice rose to a low cry. 'Since you say it was a sin I repent, I will — what? You are not in earnest, Father?

Make restitution? Give the whole fortune to a nun? Oh, no, no! You cannot expect me to do that! Rob my children of what would have been theirs even if I had not taken the will? It is out of the question, I tell you! Utterly out of the question! Besides, it is not mine at all — I have not got a penny of it! It is all my husband's and I cannot touch it — do you understand?'

Sister Giovanna had listened in spite of herself.

'The nun expects nothing and does not want the money,' she said, bending down. 'Try to rest now, for you are very tired.'

'Rest?' cried the Princess, starting up in bed and leaning on one hand. 'How can I rest when it torments me day and night? I come to you for absolution and you refuse it, and tell me to rest!'

She broke into a wild laugh again, but Sister Giovanna instantly seized her arm as she had done before, and spoke in the same commanding way.

'Be silent!' she said energetically.

The delirious woman began to whine.

'You are so rough, Father — so unkind to-day! What is the matter with you? You never treated me like this before!'

She was sobbing the next moment, and real tears trickled through her fingers as she covered her face with her hands.

'You see — how — how penitent I am!' she managed to cry in a broken voice. 'Have pity, Father!'

She was crying bitterly, but though she was out of her mind the nun could not help feeling that she was acting

a part, even in her delirium, and in spite of the tears that forced themselves through her hands and ran down, wetting the lace and spotting the scarlet ribbons of her elaborate nightdress. Sister Giovanna put aside the thought as a possibly unjust judgment, and tried to quiet her.

'If you are really sorry for what you did, you will be forgiven,' said the nun.

This produced an immediate effect: the sobbing subsided, the tears ceased to flow, and the Princess repeated the Act of Contrition in a low voice; then she folded her hands and waited in silence. Sister Giovanna stood upright beside the pillows, and prayed very earnestly in her heart that she might forget what she had heard, or at least bear her aunt no grudge for the irreparable wrong.

But the delirious woman, who still fancied that her nurse was her confessor, was waiting for the words of absolution, and after a few moments, as she did not hear them, she broke out again in senseless terror, with sobbing and more tears. She grasped the Sister's arms wildly and dragged herself up till she was on her knees in bed, imploring and weeping, pleading and sobbing, while she trembled visibly from head to foot.

The case was a difficult one, even for an experienced nurse. A lay woman might have taken upon herself to personate the priest and pronounce the words of the absolution in the hope of quieting the patient, but no member of a religious order would do such a thing, except to save life, and such a case could hardly arise. The Princess Chiaromonte was in no bodily danger, and the

chances were that the delirium would leave her before long; when it disappeared she would probably fall asleep, and it was very unlikely that she should remember anything she had said in her ravings. Meanwhile it was certainly not good for her to go on crying and throwing herself about, as she was doing, for the fever was high already and her wild excitement might increase the temperature still further.

Sister Giovanna took advantage of a brief interval, when she was perhaps only taking breath between her lamentations, out of sheer necessity.

'You must compose yourself,' the nun said with authority. 'You seem to forget that you have been ill. Lie down for a little while, and I will come back presently. In the meantime, I give you my word that your niece has forgiven you with all her heart.'

She could say that with a clear conscience, just then, and gently disengaging herself, she succeeded without much difficulty in making the Princess lay her head on the pillow, for the words had produced a certain effect; then, leaving the bedside, she went back to the table. But she did not sit down, and only remained standing about a minute before going back to the patient.

She went round by the opposite side of the screen, however, with the hope that the Princess, seeing her come from another direction, would take her for a different person. Very small things sometimes affect people in delirium, and the little artifice was successful; she came forward, speaking cheerfully in her ordinary voice, and at once put her arm under the pillow, propping her

aunt's head in order to make her drink comfortably. There was no resistance now.

'You are much better already,' she said in an encouraging tone. 'Does your head ache much?'

'It feels a little light,' the Princess said, quite naturally, 'but it does not hurt me now. I think I have been asleep — and dreaming, too.'

Perhaps some suspicion that she had been raving crossed her unsettled brain, for she glanced quickly at the nun and then shut her eyes.

'Yes,' she said, apparently satisfied; 'I have been dreaming.'

Sister Giovanna only smiled, as sympathetically as she could, and sitting down by the head of the bed, she stroked the burning forehead with her cool hand, softly and steadily, for several minutes; and little by little the Princess sank into a quiet sleep, for she was exhausted by the effort she had unconsciously made. When she was breathing regularly, the nun left her side and went noiselessly back to her seat behind the screen.

She did not open her breviary again that night. For a long time she sat quite still, with her hands folded on the edge of the table, gazing into the furthest corner of the room with unwinking eyes.

She had said that she forgave her aunt with all her heart, and she had believed that it was true; but she was less sure now that she could think of her past life, and of what might have been if she had not been driven from her home destitute and forced to take refuge with Madame Bernard.

In the light of what she had just learned, the past had a very different look. It was true that she had urged Giovanni to join the expedition, and had used arguments which had convinced herself as well as him. But she had made him go because, if he had stayed, he would have sacrificed his career in the army in order to earn bread for her, who was penniless. If she had inherited even a part of the fortune that should have been hers, it never would have occurred to him to leave the service and go into business for her support; or if it had crossed his mind, she would have dissuaded him easily enough. So far as mere money went, he had not wanted or needed it for himself, but for her; and if she had been rich and had married him, he could not have been reproached with living on her. To persuade him, she had urged that his honour required him to accept a post of danger instead of resigning from the army as soon as it was offered to him, and this had been true to some extent; but if there had been no question of his leaving the service, she would have found him plenty of satisfactory reasons for not going to Africa, and he had not been the kind of man whom gossips care to call a coward. Reasons? She would have invented twenty in those days, when she was not a nun, but just a loving girl with all her womanhood before her!

If her aunt had not stolen the will and robbed her, she would have hindered Giovanni from leaving Italy, and she would have married him, that was the plain truth. He would have been alive now, in his youth and his strength and his love for her, instead of having perished

in the African desert. That was the thought that tormented the guilty woman, too: it was the certainty that her crime had indirectly sent him to his death. So thought Sister Giovanna as she sat staring into the dark corner through the hours of the night, and she wondered how she had been able to say that she forgave, or had dared to hope that she could forget. If it had been only for herself, it might have been quite different; but her imagination had too often unwillingly pictured the tragic death of the man she had loved so well to forgive the woman who had caused it, now that she had revealed herself at last.

So long as Angela had believed that her father had left no will, because he had been in ignorance of the law, she had been able to tell herself that her great misfortune had been inevitable; but since it turned out that he had provided for her and had done his duty by her, according to his light, the element of inevitable fate disappeared, and the awful conviction that Giovanni's life had been wantonly sacrificed to enrich Princess Chiaromonte and her children forced itself upon her intelligence and would not be thrust out.

It seemed to Sister Giovanna that this was the first real temptation that had assailed her since she had taken her vows, the first moment of active regret for what might have been, as distinguished from that heart-felt sorrow for the man who had perished which had not been incompatible with a religious life. Recalling the Mother Superior's words of warning, she recorded her failure, as the first of its kind, and prayed that it might not be

irretrievable, and that resentment and regret might ebb away and leave her again as she had been before the unforgetable voice had pierced her ears with the truth she had never guessed.

It was a great effort now to go to the bedside and do what must be done for the sick woman — to smooth the pillow for the head that had thought such thoughts and to stroke the hand that had done such a deed. She was tempted to take the little black bag and leave the house quietly, before any one was up. That was not a very dreadful thought, of course, but it seemed terrible to her, whose first duty in life was to help sufferers and soothe those who were in pain. It seemed to her almost as bad as if a soldier in battle were suddenly tempted to turn his back on his comrades, throw down his rifle, and run away.

She felt it each time that she had to rise and go round the screen, and when she saw the flushed face on the pillow in the shadow, the longing to be gone was almost greater than she could resist. She had not understood before what it meant to loathe any living thing, but she knew it now, and if she did her duty conscientiously that night, easy and simple though it was, she deserved more credit than many of the Sisters who had gone so bravely to nurse the lepers in far Rangoon.

She did not feel the smallest wish to hurt the woman who had injured her, let that be said in her praise; for though vengeance be the Lord's, to long for it is human. She only desired to be out of the house, and out of sight of the face that lay where her father's had lain, and

beyond reach of the voice that had told her what she wished she had never known.

But there was no escape and she had to bear it; and when the night wore away at last, it had been the longest she remembered in all her life. Her face was as white as the Mother Superior's and her dark blue eyes looked almost black; even Madame Bernard would not have recognised the bright-haired Angela of other days in the weary and sad-faced nun who met the doctor outside the door of the sick-room when he came at eight o'clock.

She told him that the patient had been delirious about midnight, but had rested tolerably ever since. He glanced at the temperature chart she brought him and then looked keenly at her face and frowned.

'What is the matter with all of you White Sisters?' he growled discontentedly. 'First they send me one who cannot stay over night, and then they send me one who has not been to bed for a week and ought to stay there for a month! When did you leave your last case?'

'Yesterday morning,' answered Sister Giovanna submissively. 'I slept most of the afternoon. I am not tired and can do my work very well, I assure you.'

'Oh, you can, can you?' The excellent man glared at her savagely through his spectacles. 'You cannot say anything yourself, of course, but I shall go to your hospital to-day and give your Mother Superior such a scolding as she never had in her life! She ought to be ashamed to send out a nurse in your worn-out condition!'

'I felt quite fresh and rested when I left the Convent

in the evening,' said the Sister in answer. 'It is not the Mother Superior's fault.'

'It is!' retorted the doctor, who could not bear contradiction. 'She ought to know better, and I shall tell her so. Go home at once, Sister, and go to bed and stay there!'

'I am quite able to work,' protested Sister Giovanna quietly. 'There is nothing the matter with me.'

Still the doctor glared at her.

'Show me your tongue!' he said roughly.

The nun meekly opened her mouth and put out her little tongue: it was as pink as a rose-leaf. The doctor grunted, grabbed her wrist and began to count the pulse. Presently he made another inarticulate noise, as if he were both annoyed and pleased at having been mistaken.

'Something on your mind?' he asked, more kindly — 'some mental distress?'

'Yes.' The word was spoken reluctantly.

'I am sorry I was impatient,' he said, and his large brown eyes softened behind his round spectacles as he turned to enter the sick-room.

It was not his business to ask what had so greatly disturbed the peace of Sister Giovanna.

CHAPTER X

WHEN the Princess Chiaromonte was getting well, she asked some questions of her doctor, to which he replied as truthfully as he could. She inquired, for instance, whether she had been delirious at the beginning, and whether she had talked much when her mind was wandering, and his answers disturbed her a little. As sometimes happens in such cases, she had disjointed recollections of what she had said, and vague visions of herself that were not mere creations of her imagination. It was like a dream that had not been quite a dream; opium-eaters know what the sensation is better than other men. Under the influence of laudanum, or the pipe, or the hypodermic, they have talked brilliantly, but they cannot remember what the conversation was about; or else they know that they have been furiously angry, but cannot recall the cause of their wrath nor the person on whom it was vented; or they have betrayed a secret, but for their lives they could not say who it was to whom they told it. The middle-aged woman of the world felt that her reputation was a coat of many colours, and her past, when she looked back to it, was like a badly-constructed play in which the stage is crowded with personages who have little connection with each other. There was much which she herself did not care to remember, but much more that no one else need

ever know; and as she had never before been delirious, nor even ill, the thought that she had now perhaps revealed incidents of her past life was anything but pleasant.

'It is so very disagreeable to think that I may have talked nonsense,' she said to the doctor, examining one of her white hands thoughtfully.

'Do not disturb yourself about that,' he answered in a reassuring tone, for he understood much better than she guessed. 'A good trained nurse is as silent about such accidental confessions as a good priest is about intentional ones.'

'Confession!' cried the Princess, annoyed. 'As if I were concealing a crime! I only mean that I probably said very silly things. By the bye, I had several nurses, had I not? You kept changing them. Do you happen to know who that Sister Giovanna was, who looked so ill? You sent her back after two days, I think, because you thought she might break down. She reminded me of a niece of mine whom I have not seen for years, but I did not like to ask her any questions, and besides, I was much too ill.'

'I have no idea who she was before she entered the order,' the doctor answered.

He was often asked such futile questions about nurses, and would not have answered them if he had been able to do so. But in asking information the Princess was unwittingly conveying it, for it flashed upon him that Sister Giovanna was perhaps indeed that niece of whom she spoke, and whom she was commonly said to have

defrauded of her fortune; the nun herself had told him of the sick woman's delirious condition, and he remembered her looks and her admission that she was in mental distress. All this tallied very well with the guess that her aunt had made some sort of confession of her deed while her mind was wandering, and that she now dimly recalled something of the sort. He put the theory away for future consideration, and left the Princess in ignorance that he had thought of it or had even attached any special meaning to her words.

She was far from satisfied, however, and made up her mind to follow up the truth at all costs. As a first step, she sent a generous donation to the Convent of the White Sisters, as soon as she was quite recovered; and as her illness had not been serious enough to explain such an important thank-offering, she wrote a line to say that she had never been ill before, and had been so much impressed by the care she had received that she felt she must really do something to help such an excellent institution. It would give her keen pleasure to visit the hospital, she said in conclusion, but that was no doubt too great a favour to ask.

In thanking her, the Mother Superior replied that it would be no favour at all, and that the Princess would be welcome whenever she chose to send word that she was coming. On the day following that, the Mother told Sister Giovanna what had happened, and with characteristic directness asked what she thought about her aunt's charity.

'It is very kind of her,' answered the young nun in

that monotonous, businesslike tone which all religious use when speaking of an apparently charitable action for the motive of which they are not ready to vouch, though they have no reasonable ground for criticism.

People of the world often speak in that voice when unexpectedly asked to give an opinion about some person whom they dislike but do not dare to abuse.

The little white volcano flared up energetically, however.

'I hate that sort of answer!' she cried, with a delicate snort.

Sister Giovanna looked at her in surprise, but said nothing.

'I cannot refuse the money,' said the Mother Superior, 'but I heartily wish I could! She has given it in order to come here and to be well received if she chooses to come again. I am sure of that, and she can have no object in coming here except to make mischief for you. It may be wicked of me, but I do not trust that lady in the least! Do you?'

She asked the question suddenly.

'She cannot harm me more than she did years ago,' Sister Giovanna answered.

'I wish that were certain!' said the other. 'I wish I had gone to nurse her myself that night instead of sending you!'

She was so evidently in earnest that the Sister was even more surprised than before, and wondered what was the matter. But as it was not her place to ask questions, and as the Mother Superior's doubt, or pre-

sentiment of trouble, was evidently suggested by sincere affection for herself, she said nothing, and went about her work without letting her mind dwell too long on the conversation. Men and women who lead the religious life in earnest acquire a much greater control of their secret thoughts than ordinary people can easily believe it possible to exercise.

Nevertheless, the Princess's voice came back to her ears when she was alone and told the story over and over again; and somehow her aunt was often mentioned in the Convent as a recent benefactress who was showing a lively interest in the hospital, and would perhaps give further large sums to it which could be expended for good. Sister Giovanna never said anything when the subject came up, but she could not help thinking of Judas's suggestion that the alabaster box of precious ointment might have been sold and given to the poor, and a disturbing spirit whispered that Princess Chiaromonte, whose past might well be compared with the Magdalen's, had done what Iscariot would have advised.

In due time, too, the great lady visited the Convent and hospital, and was shown over it systematically by the Mother Superior herself, followed by an approving little escort of nurses and novices, for it was of course permissible to appreciate and admire the smart clothes of a benefactress, whereas it would have been the height of levity to bestow so much attention on a lady visitor who was merely fashionable and had done nothing for the institution. This, at least, was the novices' point of view. But the little white volcano seemed quietly

cross, and held her small head very high as she led the Princess from one ward to another to the beautifully fitted operating-room; and when she spoke her tone was strangely cold and mordant, as a woman's voice sometimes sounds in the Alps, when she speaks across an ice-fall or a frozen lake.

The Princess looked behind her repeatedly, and her eyes sought her niece's face amongst those she saw, but she asked no questions about her, and apparently gave all her attention to what was shown her. Sister Giovanna was in her cell during all that time, and should no doubt have been occupied; but instead, she was standing idly at her window, looking through one of the diamond-shaped openings in the lattice, in the direction of Monteverde. She was hardly aware of what she saw, however, for in imagination she was following her aunt through the halls and wards and long corridors, and a struggle was going on in her heart which hurt her and made her despise herself.

The woman who had ruined her life was under the same roof with her again, and she could not forgive her; and that seemed a very great sin. What had she gained in the five years that had gone by since the beginning of her noviciate, if she could not even forgive an injury? That was the question. Since her life had led her to nothing better than smouldering resentment and sharp regret, it had not been the holy life she had meant it to be — the failure she must score against herself was a total one, a general defeat — and all that she had believed she had been doing for the dead man's sake

must count for nothing, since she had not once been really in a state of grace.

No doubt her self-accusation went too far, as a confessor would have told her, or even the Mother Superior, if that good and impulsive woman had known what was in her mind. But Sister Giovanna did not believe she could go far enough in finding fault with herself for such great sins as her regret for a married life that might have been, and her lasting anger against a person who had robbed her; and it was while she was standing at her latticed window that morning that she first thought of making an even more complete sacrifice by joining the Sisters who intended to go out to the Rangoon leper hospital in the spring.

It was not with the hope of dying young that she wished to go and face death daily, but in the earnest desire to escape from what she called her temptation, and to regain that peace of mind which had been hers for a long time and now was gone. She had made for herself a little treasure-house of grace laid up, to be offered for Giovanni's soul, and the gold of her affliction and the jewels of her unselfish labours had been gathered there to help him. That had been her simple and innocent belief, but it had broken down suddenly as soon as she discovered that she was only a human, resentful, regretful woman after all, as far below the mystic detachment from the outward world as she had been in those first days of her grief, at Madame Bernard's, when she had sat listless all the day long, a broken-hearted girl. What she had taken for gold and had stored up

for Giovanni's welfare was only the basest metal, her jewels were but chips of gaudy glass, her sacrifice was a failure after all. Worse than that, her dead man came back alive from his grave and haunted her in dreams, threatening righteous judgment on the woman who had cheated her and him of earthly happiness.

I shall not dwell on what she felt. Men and women who have honestly tried to lead the good life for years and have suddenly realised that they are as human as ever before, will understand what I have written. The rest must either believe that it is true or, not believing, read on for the sake of knowing Sister Giovanna's strange story, or else throw my book aside for a dull novel not worth reading. We cannot always be amusing, and real life is not always gay.

The young nun waited in her cell till the Mother Superior herself opened the door and entered. For the Princess was gone, after seeing everything, praising everything with the flattering indiscrimination of total ignorance, and, finally, after asking permission to make another visit. She had spent ten minutes in the Mother's own rooms before leaving, and had asked the names of the three Sisters who had taken care of her in succession, writing them down on the back of a visiting-card. She wished to remember them in her prayers, she said; but the little white volcano almost laughed in her face, and the black diamond eyes twinkled furiously as they turned away to hide their scornful amusement — so strong was the nun's conviction that the new benefactress was a humbug. The Princess looked at the names

quite calmly after she had written them — Sister Saint Paul, Sister Giovanna, and Sister Marius — and asked whether she had seen any of them during her visit. But the Mother Superior answered that they were all three either nursing private cases or not on duty, which might mean that they were resting in their cells.

Sister Giovanna started slightly as the door of her cell opened, for she had scarcely realised that she had not moved from the window for a long time. The elder woman had not taken the trouble to knock, and, strange to say, a faint blush rose in the Sister's face as if she had been surprised and were a little ashamed of being caught in idleness instead of reading her breviary for the day or doing something useful with her hands. The black eyes looked at her searchingly, for nothing escaped them.

'What have you been thinking of?' asked the impulsive woman.

There was a moment's silence.

'The Rangoon lepers,' answered the Sister in a quiet voice.

The Mother Superior's white face hardened strangely.

'The Princess Chiaromonte is gone,' she said rather sharply, 'and you are wanted in the surgical ward at once.'

She turned without another word and went quickly away, leaving the door open. It was clear that she was not pleased with the answer she had received.

Six weeks later Sister Giovanna went to her rooms on the other side of the cloistered court after first chapel and knocked at the door. It was a Monday morning in

March, and she was to be Supervising Nurse for the week, but the custom was to go on duty at eight o'clock and it was not yet seven.

'Well?' asked the Mother Superior, looking up from her papers, while the young nun remained standing respectfully at the corner of the big desk.

The tone did not invite confidence; for some reason as yet unexplained the Mother had avoided speaking with her best nurse since that morning in the cell.

'I have made up my mind to go to the lepers with the others, Mother, if you will give me your permission.'

The alabaster face suddenly glowed like white fire in the early light, the dark eyebrows knitted themselves angrily, and the lips parted to speak a hasty word, but immediately closed again. A long silence followed Sister Giovanna's speech, and the elder nun looked down at her papers and moved some of them about mechanically, from one place to another on the table.

'Are you angry with me, Mother?' asked Sister Giovanna, not understanding.

'With you, child?' The Mother looked up, and her face had softened a little. 'No, I am not angry with you — at least, I hope I am not.'

It was rather an ambiguous answer, to say the least, and the young nun waited meekly for an explanation. None came, but instead, advice, delivered in a direct and businesslike tone.

'You had better put the idea out of your mind for a month or so, honestly and with all the intention of which you are capable. If this is a mere impulse, felt under

some mental distress, it will subside and you will think no more about it. If it is a true call, it will come back and you will obey it in due time. More than that, I cannot tell you. If you are not satisfied that I am advising you well, go to Monsignor Saracinesca the next time he is here. It is my place to warn, not to hinder; to help you if I can, not to stand in your way. That is all, my daughter. Go to your duties.'

Sister Giovanna bent her head obediently and left the room at once. When she was gone, the Mother Superior rose from her desk and went into her cell, locking the door after her. An hour later she was still on her knees and her face was buried in her hands. She was weeping bitterly.

In all that numerous community which she governed and guided so well there was not one person who would have believed that she could shed tears, scalding and passionate, even rebellious, perhaps, if the whole truth were known; for no Sister or novice of them all could have imagined that such irresistible grief could take possession of a woman who, as they all said among themselves, was made of steel and ice, merely because one more of them wished to go to the Far East where so many had gone already.

But they did not know anything about the Mother Superior. Indeed, when all was said, they knew next to nothing of her past, and as it was against all rules to discuss such matters, it was not likely that they should ever hear more, even if a new Sister joined them who chanced to have some information. They were aware,

of course, that her name, in religion, was Mother Veronica, though they did not speak of her except as the Mother Superior. It was true that they had never heard of a nun of their order taking the name of Veronica, but that was not a matter to criticise either. She spoke exceedingly pure Italian, with the accent and intonation of a Roman lady, but it was no secret that when she had come to take the place of her predecessor, who had died suddenly, she had arrived from Austria; and she also spoke German fluently, which argued that she had been in that country some time. There was certainly nothing in these few facts to account for what she suffered when Sister Giovanna spoke of going to Rangoon, and it would have been hard to believe that her burning tears overflowed in spite of her, not only that first time but often afterwards, at the mere thought of parting with the best nurse in the hospital, even if she felt some special sympathy for her.

Whatever the cause of her trouble was, no one knew of it; and that she found no cause for self-accusation in what she felt is clear, since she made no mention of it in her next confession. Indeed, she more often found fault with herself for being harsh in her judgments and too peremptory and tyrannical in the government of her community, than for giving way easily to the impulses of human sympathy. She was not nervous either, in the sense of her nerves being unsteady or overwrought in consequence of a long-continued strain; there was nothing in her weeping that could have suggested a neurotic breakdown even to the most sceptical of

physicians. It was genuine, irresistible, overwhelming grief, and she knew that its cause was not even in part imaginary, but was altogether real, and terrible beyond any expression.

Nevertheless, she found strength to speak to Monsignor Saracinesca of Sister Giovanna's intention, one day when he came to see her early in the morning on a matter of business; for he managed the finances of the Convent hospital and was also its representative in any questions in which the institution, as distinguished from the order, had secular dealings with the world.

The prelate and the Mother met as usual in the cloistered garden, and when Convent affairs had been disposed of, they continued their walk in silence for a few moments.

'I want your unprejudiced opinion about the future of one of the Sisters,' said the Mother Superior at last, in her usual tone.

'I will try to give it,' answered Monsignor Saracinesca.

'Sister Giovanna wishes to go to Rangoon with the other three.'

The churchman betrayed no surprise, and answered without hesitation:

'You know what I always say in such cases, when I am consulted.'

'Yes. I have given her that advice — to wait a month, to try to put the idea out of her mind, to make sure that it is not a passing impulse.'

'You cannot do more,' said Monsignor Saracinesca, 'nor can I.'

The Mother Superior turned up her white face and looked at him so steadily that he gazed at her in surprise.

'It ought to be stopped,' she said, with sudden energy. 'It may be wrong to call it suicide and to interfere on that ground, but there is another, and a good one. I am responsible for the hospital here, for the nursing in it, and for the Sisters who are sent out to private cases. Year after year, one, two, and sometimes three of my best young nurses go away to these leper asylums in Rangoon and other places in the Far East. It is not the stupid ones that go, the dull, devoted creatures who could do that one thing well, because it is perfectly mechanical and a mere question of prophylaxis, precaution, and routine — and charity. Those that go always seem to be the best, the very nurses who are invaluable in all sorts of difficult cases from an operation to a typhoid fever; the most experienced, the cleverest, the most gifted! How can I be expected to keep up our standard if this goes on year after year? It is outrageous! And the worst of it is that the "vocation" is catching! The clever ones catch it because they are the most sensitively organised, but not the good, simple, humdrum little women who would be far better at nursing lepers than at a case of appendicitis — and better in heaven than in a leper asylum, for that matter!'

Monsignor Saracinesca listened in silence to this energetic tirade; but when the little white volcano was quiescent for a moment, he shook his head. It was less an expression of disapproval than of doubt.

'It is manifestly impossible to send the least intelligent of the Sisters, if they do not offer to go,' he answered. 'Besides, how would you pick out the dull ones? By examination?'

He was not without a sense of humour, and his sharply-chiselled lips twitched a little but were almost instantly grave again. The Mother Superior's profile was as still as a marble medallion.

'It ought to be stopped altogether,' she said presently, with conviction. 'Meanwhile, though I have told Sister Giovanna that it is not my place to hinder her, much less my right, I tell you plainly that I will prevent her from going, if I can!'

This frank statement did not surprise the prelate, who was used to her direct speech and energetic temper, and liked both. But he said little in answer.

'That is your affair, Reverend Mother. You will do what your conscience dictates.'

'Conscience?' repeated the nun with a resentful question in her tone. 'If the word really means anything, which I often doubt, it is an instinctive discernment of right and wrong in one's own particular case, to be applied to the salvation of one's own soul. Is it not?'

'Undoubtedly.'

'What have I to do with my own particular case?' The volcano flared up indignantly. 'It is my duty to do what is best for the souls and bodies of forty women and girls, more or less, and of a great number of sick persons here and in their own homes, without consider-

ing myself at all, my instincts, or my little individual discernment of my own feelings, or my human likes and dislikes of people. If my duty leads me into temptation, I have got to face temptation intentionally, instead of avoiding it, as we are taught to do, and if I break down under it, so much the worse for me — the good of the others will have been accomplished nevertheless! That is one side of my life. Another is that if my duty demands that I should tear out my heart and trample on it, I ought not to hesitate, though I knew I was to die of the pain!'

The clear low voice vibrated strangely.

'But I will not do it, unless it is to bring about some real good to others,' she added.

Monsignor Saracinesca glanced at her face again before he answered.

'Your words are clear enough, but I do not understand you,' he said. 'If I can possibly help you, tell me what it is that distresses you. If not, let us talk of other things.'

'You cannot help me.' Her thin lips closed upon each other in an even line.

'I am sorry,' answered the churchman gravely. 'As for Sister Giovanna's intention, I share your opinion, for I think she can do more good here than by sacrificing herself in Burmah. If she consults me, I shall tell her so.'

'Thank you.'

They parted, and the Mother Superior went back to her room and her work with a steady step and holding

her head high. But she did not even see a lay sister who was scrubbing her small private staircase, and who rose to let her pass, saluting her as she went by.

Monsignor Saracinesca left the garden by the glass door that opened into the large hall, already described, and he went out past the portress's little lodge. She was just opening the outer door when he came up with her, and the next moment he found himself face to face with Madame Bernard. He stepped back politely to let her pass, and lifted his hat with a smile of recognition; but instead of advancing she uttered a little cry of surprise and satisfaction, and retreated to let him come out. He noticed that her face betrayed great excitement, and she seemed hardly able to speak.

'What is the matter?' he asked kindly, as he emerged from the deep doorway.

The portress was waiting for Madame Bernard to enter, but the Frenchwoman had changed her mind and held up her hand, shaking one forefinger.

'Not to-day, Anna!' she cried. 'Or later — I will come back, perhaps — I cannot tell. May I walk a few steps with you, Monseigneur?'

'By all means,' answered the prelate.

The door of the Convent closed behind them, but Madame Bernard was evidently anxious to get well out of hearing before she spoke. At the corner of the quiet street she suddenly stood still and looked up to her companion's face, evidently in great perturbation.

'Well?' he asked. 'What is it?'

'Giovanni Severi is alive.'

Monsignor Saracinesca thought the good woman was dreaming.

'It is impossible,' he said emphatically.

'On the contrary,' returned Madame Bernard, 'it is perfectly true. If you do not believe me, look at this!'

She opened her governess's reticule and fumbled amongst the little school-books and papers it contained. In a moment she brought out a letter, sealed, stamped, and postmarked, and held it up before the tall prelate's eyes.

It was addressed to 'Donna Angela Chiaromonte,' to the care of Madame Bernard at the latter's lodgings in Trastevere, the stamp was an Italian one, and the postmark was that of the military post-office in Massowah. Monsignor Saracinesca looked at the envelope curiously, took it from Madame Bernard and examined the stamped date. Then he asked her if she was quite sure of the handwriting, and she assured him that she was; Giovanni had written before he started into the interior with the expedition, and she herself had received the letter from the postman and had given it to Angela. What was more, after Angela had gone to live at the Convent, Madame Bernard had found the old envelope of the letter in a drawer and had kept it, and she had just looked at it before leaving her house.

'He is alive,' she said with conviction; 'he has written this letter to her, and he does not know that she is a nun. He is coming home, I am sure!'

Monsignor Saracinesca was a man of great heart and wide experience, but such a case as this had never come

to his knowledge. He stood still in deep thought, bending a little as he rested both his hands on the battered silver knob of his old stick.

'He is coming home!' repeated Madame Bernard in great distress. 'What are we to do?'

'What were you going to do just now, when I met you at the door?' asked the prelate.

'I do not know! I was going to see her! Perhaps I would have broken the news to her gently, perhaps I would have said nothing and kept the letter to give it to her at another time! How can I tell what I would have done? It would have depended so much on the way she took the first suggestion! People have died of joy, Monseigneur! A little weakness of the heart, a sudden joyful surprise, it stops beating — that has happened before now!'

'Yes. It has happened before now. I knew of such a case myself.'

'And I adore the child!' cried the impulsive Frenchwoman, ready to burst into tears. 'Oh, what shall we do? What ought we to do?'

'Do you know the Mother Superior?'

'Oh yes! Quite well. Are you going to tell me that I should take the letter to her? She is a cold, hard woman, Monseigneur! A splendid woman to manage a hospital, perhaps, but she has no more heart than a steel machine! She will burn the letter, and never tell any one!'

'I think you are mistaken about her,' answered the churchman gravely. 'She has more heart than most

of us, and I believe that even you yourself are not more devoted to Sister Giovanna than she is.'

'Really, Monseigneur? Is it possible? Are you sure? What makes you think so?'

'To the best of my knowledge and belief, what I have told you is the truth, though I might find it hard to explain my reasons for saying so. But before you go to the Mother Superior, or speak of the matter to Sister Giovanna, there is something else to be done. This letter, by some strange accident of the post, may have been written before Giovanni Severi died. There is a bare possibility that it may have been mislaid in the post-office, or that he may have given it to a comrade to post, who forgot it — many things may happen to a letter.'

'Well? What must I do?'

'If he is alive, the fact is surely known already at headquarters, and you should make inquiries. To give Sister Giovanna a letter from the dead man would be wrong, in my opinion, for it would cause her needless and harmful pain. If he is dead, it should be burned, I think. But if he is really alive, after all, you have no right to burn it, and sooner or later she must have it and know the truth, with as little danger to her health and peace of mind as possible.'

'You are right, Monseigneur,' answered Madame Bernard. 'What you say is full of wisdom. I have three lessons to give this morning, and as soon as I am free I will go myself to the house of a superior officer whose daughter I used to teach, and he will find out the truth by the telephone in a few minutes.'

'I think that is the best course,' said the churchman.

So they parted, for he was going to Saint Peter's, and she turned in the direction of the nearest tramway, hastening to her pupils. And meanwhile the inevitable advanced on its unchanging course.

For Giovanni Severi was alive and well, and was on his way to Rome.

CHAPTER XI

GIOVANNI SEVERI'S adventures, between his supposed death in the massacre of the expedition and his unexpected reappearance at Massowah nearly five years later, would fill an interesting little volume in themselves; but inasmuch as an account of them would not make this story clearer and would occupy much space, it is enough to state the bare facts in a few words. Such tales of danger, suffering, and endurance have often been told at first hand, by the heroes of them, far more vividly and correctly than a mere story-teller can narrate them on hearsay.

The expedition had been attacked and destroyed by a handful of natives from a wandering tribe that was camping very near. Within a few minutes their chief was informed of what they had done, and he rode out to the spot with a large body of men at his heels. Among the dead, Giovanni Severi lay bleeding from a gash in the head, but not mortally hurt. The chief was by no means a mere dull savage, and finding an Italian officer alive, he recognised at once that it would be a mistake to knock him on the head and leave him with his comrades to be disposed of by the vultures and hyænas. On the other hand, he must not be allowed to escape to the Italian colony with news of the disaster. At some future time, and from a safe distance, it might be possible

to obtain a large ransom for him; or, on the other hand, if a large force were ever sent up the country to revenge the outrage, it might be to the credit of the chief if he could prove that the deed had been done without his knowledge and that he had treated the only survivor humanely. He therefore took possession of Giovanni and provided for his safety in a simple manner by merely stating that if the prisoner escaped he would cut off ten heads, but if any harm came to him, he would cut off at least a hundred. As no one doubted but that he would keep his word, as he invariably did in such matters, Giovanni had but small chance of ever regaining his liberty, and none at all presented itself for nearly five years. During that time he travelled with his captors or lived in camps, many hundreds of miles from the outposts of civilisation; he learned their language and the chief insisted on learning his, as it might be useful; furthermore, he was required to teach his master whatever he could about modern warfare and what little he knew of agriculture and its arts of peace. In return he was well fed, well lodged when possible, and as well clad as any man in the tribe except the chief himself, which was not saying much.

His chance came at last and he did not let it pass. It involved killing one of his guards, stunning another, and seizing the chief's own camel, and it was not without great risk to his life that he got away. A fortnight later he had travelled five hundred miles and reported himself at headquarters in Massowah, dressed in a long native shirt, a dirty turban, and nothing else, as Cap-

tain Giovanni Severi, formerly of the Staff and late of the expedition that had perished five years earlier.

It chanced, for the inevitable was at work, that the mail steamer for Italy was to leave the next morning and a small man-of-war on the following day, also homeward bound. Giovanni wrote to Angela Chiaromonte by the former and went on board the Government vessel twenty-four hours afterwards. He himself sent no telegram, because he did not know where his brothers were and he feared lest a telegraphic message might give Angela a bad shock, if it reached her at all. Moreover, he had no news of her and could get no information whatever, so that he addressed his letter to Madame Bernard's old lodgings on the mere possibility that it might reach its destination.

Any one might have supposed that the news of his escape would have been in the papers before he reached Italy, for it was telegraphed to the War Office in Rome by the officer in command of the force at Massowah. But the Minister chose to keep the intelligence a secret till Giovanni's arrival, because he expected to gain much information from him and feared lest the newspapers should get hold of him and learn facts from him which would be more useful to Italy if not made public; and when the Italian Government wishes to keep a secret, it can do so quite as well as any other, to the despair of the public press.

The consequence of the Minister's instructions was that Giovanni was met by a superior officer who came on board the man-of-war at Naples in order to forestall

any possible attempt on the part of correspondents to get hold of him, and also for the purpose of giving him further directions for his conduct. He was to proceed to Rome at once, and the Minister would receive him privately on the following day at twelve o'clock. He was recommended not to go to an hotel, but to put up with his brother, who, as he now learned, was at Monteverde, and had been privately informed of his arrival and warned to be discreet.

The mail steamer which had brought Giovanni's letter to Madame Bernard had stopped at Port Said, Alexandria, and Messina, but the man-of-war came direct to Naples, and though slower than the packet-boat, arrived there only a few hours later. Madame Bernard's inquiries, made through the old colonel whose daughter she had formerly taught, proved fruitless, because the War Office would not allow Giovanni's coming to be known, and the result was that she took the letter home with her in her bag, and spent the evening in a very disturbed state of mind, debating with herself as to what she ought to do. She would have given anything to open the envelope, if only to see the date, and once or twice, when she reflected on the importance of knowing whether the writer was alive before giving his letter to Sister Giovanna, she almost yielded; but not quite, for she was an honourable little woman, according to her lights.

Late on that night Giovanni got into the train that was to bring him to Rome before Madame Bernard would be ready to go out in the morning.

Ugo Severi had been summoned by the Minister some days previously, and had been told that his brother was alive and coming home, and would lodge with him. Meanwhile Captain Ugo was put on his honour to say nothing of the matter to his friends. Such a recommendation was, in fact, needed, as Ugo would otherwise have informed the Princess Chiaromonte, if no one else. Considering how much feeling she had shown about Giovanni's supposed death, it would have been only humane to do so; but the Minister's instructions were precise and emphatic, and Ugo kept what he knew to himself and thought about it so continually that Confucianism temporarily lost its interest for him.

He had always been on good terms with Giovanni, though they had not seen much of each other after the latter was appointed to the Staff. As for the brother who was in the Navy, Ugo rarely saw him or even heard of him, and since their father had died he himself had led a very lonely existence. His delight on learning that Giovanni had escaped and was returning may be imagined, for, in spite of his apparent coldness and love of solitude, he was a man of heart, and like many Italians of all classes his ideal of happiness would have been to live quietly under one roof with his brothers and sister. There is probably no other people in the world that finds such permanent satisfaction in what most of us would think a dull family life. It is a survival of the ancient patriarchal way of living, when the 'family' was a religion and its head was at once its absolute ruler and its high priest.

The only preparation which Ugo had made for receiving Giovanni was the purchase of an iron folding camp-bed. He told his orderly that a brother officer of his might have to spend a night in the house before long, which was strictly true. In due time a soldier on a bicycle brought him an official note from the Minister, informing him that Giovanni had reached Naples and would appear at Monteverde on the following morning. This note came late in the afternoon, and Ugo thought it needless to inform Pica, as Giovanni would certainly not wish to go to bed as soon as he arrived, so that the little bedstead need not be set up till he actually came.

At ten o'clock that evening, Ugo rose from his easy-chair, stretched himself, and whistled for Pica as usual. The orderly brought him his boots, his cloak, his sabre, and his cap, all of which he put on, as he always did, before going downstairs, for it was the hour at which he invariably inspected the neighbourhood. It was his practice to begin by walking round the outside of the enclosure, his man carrying a good lantern; he then examined the interior of the space, and finally visited the guard-room and exchanged a word with the officer on duty for the night. Of late, he had occasionally gone out again between twelve and one o'clock, before going to bed; for two or three suspicious-looking characters had been seen in the neighbourhood of the magazine, like the man in the battered brown hat who had come upon Pica one afternoon and had asked his way. There was, in fact, a disquieting suspicion at headquarters that

an attempt might be made to blow up one of the magazines; the detachments of soldiers on duty had therefore been strengthened and the officers in charge had been instructed to exercise the greatest vigilance.

When Captain Ugo went out of his door as usual, with Pica at his heels, the night was dark and it was just beginning to rain. The two went directly from the little house to the gate of the enclosure, and Ugo answered the sentry's challenge mechanically and walked briskly along the straight wall to the corner. Turning to the right then, he was following the next stretch at a good pace when he stumbled and nearly fell over something that lay in his path. As Pica held up the lantern close behind him, a man sprang up from the ground, where he must have been lying asleep, probably in liquor. By the uncertain light and in the rain, Ugo saw only the blurred vision of an individual in a ragged and dripping overcoat, with an ugly, blotched face and a ruined hat.

An instant later, and just as Ugo was challenging the man, two shots were fired. The first smashed and extinguished the lantern in Pica's hand without hurting him; the second took effect, and the Captain staggered against the wall, but instead of falling, sat down suddenly on the wet ground with his back against the masonry. The ruffian was gone and Pica had dashed after him in a fruitless pursuit, for the breaking of the lantern in his hand had checked the orderly as he was about to spring at the miscreant, who thus gained a sufficient start to ensure his escape.

In a few seconds the officer on duty and three or four of the men were on the spot with lights.

'You will have to carry me,' said the Captain calmly enough. 'I am shot in the foot and something is broken. Turn out the guard, Lieutenant, as a matter of principle and have the neighbourhood searched, though you will not find any one now. The fellow has got clean away.'

The men lifted him and carried him towards his house. Before they reached the door Pica met them, breathing hard and muttering Sicilian imprecations on the man who had wounded his master and got away; but while the Captain was being taken upstairs the orderly lit a candle and went to the telephone in the hall. He glanced at the address-book and then without hesitation he asked the central office to give him Princess Chiaromonte's number. His reason for doing so was simple: she was the only person in Rome who had ever appeared in the light of a friend of the Captain's family; she would do the right thing at once, Pica thought, and would send the best surgeon in Rome out to Monteverde in a motor in the shortest possible time. She was at home that evening, as it turned out, and at Pica's request she came to the telephone herself and heard his story.

She answered that she would try and get Doctor Pieri to go at once in her own motor, as he had the reputation of being the best surgeon in the city, but that if he could not be found she would send another doctor without delay. Pica went upstairs and found the Captain stretched on his bed in his wet clothes, while the three soldiers who had carried him up were trying to pull his

boot off instead of cutting it. One of the younger officers from the magazine was already scouring the neighbourhood in obedience to Ugo's orders.

Pica sent the men away at once with the authority which a favourite orderly instinctively exercises over his less fortunate comrades. He was neither stupid nor quite unskilled, however, and in a few minutes he had slit the Captain's boot down the seam at the back and removed it almost without hurting him, as well as the merino sock. The small round wound was not bleeding much, but it was clear that the bone of the ankle was badly injured and the whole foot was already much swollen. The revolver had evidently been of small calibre, but the charge had been heavy and the damage was considerable. Pica had the sense not to attempt to make any bandage beyond laying two soft folded handkerchiefs one upon the other to the wound and loosely confining them with a silk one. While he was busy with this, he explained what he had done. The Captain, who knew that he was badly hurt and guessed that he might be lamed for life by unskilful treatment, was glad to hear that the famous Pieri had been called. He said that he felt no pain worth speaking of, and he questioned his man as to the latter's impression of what had happened. Pica did not believe in anarchists and gave it as his opinion that the ruffian was an ordinary bad character who was in daily expectation of being arrested for some crime and who had fallen asleep in his cups, not knowing that he was close to the magazine. Being awakened suddenly, he had probably supposed

himself overtaken by justice, had fired and run away. The explanation was plausible, at all events. Neither Ugo nor his man believed that any one would really try to blow up the place, for they regarded that as quite impossible without the collusion of some one of the soldiers, which was not to be thought of.

While they were talking, Pica managed to get off the Captain's outer clothes; but as they were partly wet with rain, the bed was now damp. He therefore went and got the new camp bedstead and set it up, spread dry blankets and sheets over it, and lifted Ugo to it without letting the injured foot hang down, for he was a fairly strong man and was far from clumsy.

The change had just been successfully made when a motor was heard coming up the short stretch from the high-road to the house, and Pica hastened downstairs to open the door for the surgeon. To his surprise, but much to his satisfaction, the Princess Chiaromonte was the first to get out in the rain, bareheaded, but muffled in a waterproof. She had no footman and no umbrella, and she made a quick dash for the door, followed at once by Doctor Pieri. She recognised the handsome orderly and smiled at him as she shook the rain-drops from her hair and then gave him her cloak.

'Is he badly hurt?' she asked quickly; but she saw from Pica's face that it was not a matter of life and death, and she did not wait for his answer. 'We will go upstairs at once,' she added, leading the way to the steps.

On learning that Ugo was already in bed, she said she would wait in the large sitting-room while the doctor

went in to see what could be done. If the Captain would see her, she would speak to him when Pieri had finished his work.

Nearly three-quarters of an hour passed before he joined her.

'It is a bad fracture,' he said, 'and it will require an operation if he is not to be lamed for life. I should much prefer to perform it in a proper place. There is none better than the private hospital of the White Sisters and it is by far the nearest. Do you happen to know the place?'

The Princess said that she did and that she was a patroness of the Convent. The surgeon observed that it was now past eleven, and that the patient could not be moved before morning. If she agreed with him and would lend her motor for the purpose, he would communicate with the hospital and take the Captain there himself between eight and nine o'clock. For the present he needed no special nursing, and the orderly seemed to be an unusually intelligent young fellow, who could be trusted and was sincerely attached to his master. The Princess agreed to everything, and asked whether the Captain wished to see her.

He did, and when she stood beside him he pressed her hand gratefully and thanked her with real feeling for her great kindness. She answered, before Pica, that she would always do anything in her power for any one of his name, and she explained that she would be at the hospital on the following morning to see that he had a good private room and received special care. He

thanked her again and bade her good-night. Two or three minutes later he heard the motor puffing and wheezing, and Pica came back after shutting the door. Ugo now sent him over to the guard-room with a message to the lieutenant on duty, requesting him to write a brief official account of the occurrence and to send it by hand to headquarters the next morning. It was necessary that another officer should take Ugo's place in command of the fort while he was in hospital.

Pica came back again in a few moments. Then Ugo insisted on having writing-materials, and sat up, propped with cushions, while he wrote a short note to the Minister of War, explaining what had happened, and that he would not leave his home on the morrow till his brother had arrived, but that some further arrangement must be made if Giovanni was to lodge in the house, which would probably be wanted for the officer who was to take his own place. Pica was to be at the Minister's own residence at seven o'clock with this note and was to wait for an answer. The Minister was known to be a very early riser and would have plenty of time to arrange matters as he thought best.

Ugo was now in a good deal of pain, and it seemed very long before the panes of his window turned from black to grey as the dawn fore-lightened. He made Pica get him coffee, and soon after sunrise the orderly brought one of the men from the guard-house to remain within call in case the Captain needed anything. Pica took his bicycle and went off to the city with the note for the Minister.

As Ugo had anticipated, Giovanni arrived in a station cab while the orderly was still absent, and was admitted by the soldier, on his representing that he was a relation of the Captain's and had come a long distance to see him. The man briefly explained that Ugo was in bed, having been wounded in the foot during the night, but was in no danger. A moment later the brothers were together.

Ugo saw a man standing beside his bed and holding out his hand whom he would certainly not have recognised if he had met him in the street. His skin was almost as dark as an Arab's, and he wore a brown beard which had reddened in streaks under the African sun. He was as lean as a half-starved greyhound, but did not look ill, and his eyes were fiery and deeper set than formerly. His head had been shaved when he had worn a turban, but the hair was now more than half an inch long, and was as thick as a beaver's fur. He was dressed in a suit of thin grey clothes which he had picked up in Massowah, and which did not fit him, and his canvas shoes were in a bad way. When he spoke, it was with a slight accent, unlike any that Ugo had heard, and he occasionally hesitated as if trying to find a word.

After the first greetings, he sat down and told the main facts of his story. When he paused the two looked at each other and after a while they laughed.

'The disguise is complete,' Ugo said. 'But are you going to call on the Minister in those clothes? If you are seen near the magazine in that condition you will be warned off and I shall have to explain who you are.'

'I suppose I could get into a uniform of yours, since I have grown thin,' Giovanni answered. 'We are the same height, I remember, and as I am in the artillery no one can find fault with me for wearing the uniform of another regiment than my own, in an emergency. It will be better than presenting myself before the Minister in these rags! I suppose you have got your captaincy by this time?'

'Six months ago!'

They talked on, and Ugo explained that he was to be taken to the hospital of the White Sisters soon after eight o'clock.

'I shall go with you,' Giovanni answered, 'and see you installed in your room. The Minister does not want me till twelve o'clock.'

They agreed to tell Pica, when he returned, that Giovanni was an artillery officer and a relative who had just arrived from a long journey without any luggage. As the orderly had known that the Captain expected a visitor before long, he would not be surprised, and the relationship would account for Giovanni's name.

The latter selected an undress uniform from his brother's well-stocked wardrobe and proceeded to scrub and dress in the adjoining dressing-room, talking to Ugo through the open door and asking him questions about old friends and comrades. Ugo told him of the Princess Chiaromonte's visit and of her kindness in coming with Doctor Pieri on the previous evening. Giovanni appeared at the door, half dressed.

'Did you tell her that I am alive?' he asked.

'No. The Ministry has made an official secret of it, so I have told no one.'

'And you say that she will be at the hospital this morning! We shall meet, then. I wonder whether she will know me.'

'It is impossible, I should say,' Ugo answered, looking at his brother's lean face and heavy beard. 'I hardly recognise you even now!'

Giovanni finished dressing and came out at last, looking very smart in Ugo's clothes. He had asked no questions about Angela, for he felt tolerably sure that Ugo had never known her, and it was his intention to go directly from the hospital to Madame Bernard's lodgings, where he hoped to find them both as he had left them. He could not bring himself to make vague and roundabout inquiries just then, and he was still less inclined to confide his love story to this brother whom he hardly felt that he knew. So he kept his own counsel and waited, as he had learned to do in five years of slavery.

The Minister sent back a line by Pica to say that Giovanni was to come to him at noon, and would then receive his instructions as to a change of lodging, if any should seem advisable. There was a word of sympathy also for Ugo.

In less than an hour more, Giovanni had helped Pica to carry Ugo down to the Princess's motor, which had appeared punctually, bringing Doctor Pieri, and the wounded man was comfortably placed in the limousine with the surgeon beside him and Giovanni sitting oppo-

site. Ugo introduced his brother as a relation who had arrived very opportunely that morning.

The motor buzzed away from the door, and reached the Convent of Santa Giovanna d' Aza in a few minutes. The sky had cleared after the rain and the April sun was shining gloriously.

CHAPTER XII

SISTER GIOVANNA was the supervising nurse for the week, and in the natural course of her duty it was she who went to the telephone when Doctor Pieri called up the hospital at seven o'clock. In a few words he explained the case as far as was necessary, and begged the Sister to have a good room ready for the patient; he believed that Number Two was vacant.

It was, and the wounded man could have it. The Doctor said he would bring him in a motor towards nine o'clock.

'The patient's name, if you please,' said Sister Giovanna in a businesslike tone.

'Captain Severi. I do not know his first name. What is the matter, Sister?'

The nun had uttered a low exclamation of surprise, which Pieri had heard distinctly.

'Nothing,' she answered, controlling her voice. 'Is he a son of the late general of that name?'

'I do not know, Sister. He is a friend of the Princess Chiaromonte. Is it all right? I am busy.'

'Yes,' answered the nun's voice. 'It is all right.'

She hung up the receiver and went to give the necessary orders, rather whiter about the lips than usual. The fact that the injured officer was a friend of her aunt's

seemed to make it certain that he was one of the brothers of whom Giovanni had often spoken, and the mere thought that she was to see him in an hour or two was disturbing. For a moment she was strongly impelled to beg the Mother Superior that some one else might take her place during the morning; but in the first place it seemed cowardly to leave her post; and secondly, in order to explain her position, she would have been obliged to tell the Mother Superior her whole story, which she had never done. Monsignor Saracinesca knew it, and Madame Bernard, but no one else whom she ever saw nowadays.

Then came the comforting inward suggestion that Giovanni would have wished her to do all she could for his brother, and this at once made a great difference. She went to see that the room was in perfect order, though she was quite sure that it was, and she sent for the orderlies on duty and told them to be especially careful in moving a patient who would soon be brought, and to get ready a certain new chair which was especially constructed for carrying persons who had received injuries of the feet only, and who did not require to be transported on the ordinary stretcher, which always gives a patient the idea that his case is a serious one.

She also went out to the lodge, to warn the portress that Captain Severi was expected, and must not be kept waiting even a few seconds longer than was necessary. The excellent Anna looked up with some surprise, for she had never kept any one waiting without good cause, since she had been in charge of the gate, but she bent her

head obediently and said nothing. It seems to be a general rule with religious houses that no one is ever to wait in the street for admittance; the barrier, which is often impassable, is the door that leads inward from the vestibule.

When everything was prepared for Ugo's reception, Sister Giovanna went back to the duties which kept her constantly occupied in the morning hours and often throughout the day. She was personally responsible to the house-surgeon for the carrying out of all directions given the nurses, as he was, in grave cases, to the operating surgeon or visiting physician. It was her business to inspect everything connected with the hospital, from the laundry, the sterilising apparatus, and the kitchen, to the dispensary, where she was expected to know from day to day what supplies were on hand and what was needed. She was ultimately answerable for the smallest irregularity or accident, and had to report everything to the Mother Superior every evening after Vespers and before supper. During her week, every one in the establishment came to her for all matters that concerned the hospital and the nurses on duty by day or night; but she had nothing to do with those who were sent out to private cases. They reported themselves and gave an account of their work to the Mother Superior, whenever they returned to the Convent.

The supervising nurse for the week did not sleep in her cell, but lay down on a pallet bed behind a curtain, in her office on the first floor, close to the dispensary, where she could be called at a moment's notice, though

it rarely happened that she was disturbed between ten o'clock at night and five in the morning.

The Mother Superior had introduced the system soon after she had taken charge of the Convent hospital, of which the management now differed from that of most similar institutions in this respect, for the most competent Sisters took turns in the arduous task of supervision, from week to week. At other times they went to private cases when required, or acted as ordinary nurses. Any one who has any knowledge of hospitals managed by religious orders is aware that no two of them work by precisely the same rules, and that the rules themselves are largely the result of the Mother Superior's own experience, modified by the personal theories and practice of the operating surgeon and the principal visiting physician. The scale of everything relating to the administration is, of course, very small compared with that of any public hospital, and all responsibility therefore weighs more directly on the doctors and nurses in charge at any given moment than on a board of management; in other words, on the right individuals rather than on a body.

Princess Chiaromonte rose early and drove to the Convent in a cab, intending to come home in the motor which was to bring Ugo and the doctor. She rang, was admitted, and asked for the supervising nurse. The portress, who knew her by sight, at once led her to the large hall already mentioned, and rang the bell which gave warning that some one was waiting who had business in the hospital. She drew one of the chairs for-

ward for the Princess and went back to the lodge. A moment later a novice opened the door that led to the wards, and the visitor repeated her request, without mentioning her name.

The novice bowed and disappeared, and several minutes passed before Sister Giovanna came. She had last seen her aunt ill in bed and flushed with fever, but the Princess had changed too little in five years not to be instantly recognised by any one who had known her so recently.

Both women made a movement of surprise, and the nun stood still an instant, still holding the handle of the door. Of the two, however, she was the first to regain her composure. Her aunt rose with alacrity indeed, and held out her hand, but she coloured a little and laughed with perceptible awkwardness. She had long wished to see her niece, but the meeting had come too unexpectedly to be pleasant.

'I hope you have felt no ill effects from your illness?' Sister Giovanna spoke calmly, in a tone of civil inquiry.

'Oh, none at all!' answered the Princess. 'Thanks to your wonderful nursing,' she added, with rather too much eagerness. 'I had hoped to tell you before now how grateful I am; but though I have been here more than once, you were never here when I came.'

Sister Giovanna bent her head slightly.

'There is really nothing to thank me for,' she said. 'The novice said you wished to see me; can I be of any service to you?'

The elder woman inwardly resented the tone of

superior calm. She was now convinced that Sister Giovanna was no other than her niece Angela, though she had not yet given any direct sign of recognition. She was not quite sure of being able to meet the young eyes steadily, and when she answered she fixed her own on the line where the veil was drawn tightly across the nun's forehead. In this way she could not fail to see any quick change in the other's features.

'It is about Captain Severi,' she said very distinctly, 'Ugo, as we call him — the brother of that poor Giovanni who was murdered by savages in Africa.'

She saw what she had hoped to see and felt that she had already got the upper hand, for the nun's face turned the colour of smouldering wood ashes when they are a greyish white, though the faint, hot glow still rises in them with every passing breath of air and then fades fitfully away.

'Captain Severi's room is ready,' said Sister Giovanna steadily.

'Yes, of course!' The Princess nodded as she spoke. 'It is not that, Sister. He is a great friend of mine and I was quite devoted to his unfortunate brother, so I have come to beg that he may have the very best care while he is here.'

'You need not have any anxiety.'

Sister Giovanna sat bolt upright in her straight chair, with her hands folded on her knees. The Princess rested one elbow on the table, in an easy attitude, and glanced at her once or twice during the silence that followed. Each was wondering whether the other was

going to admit that she recognised her, and each was weighing the relative advantages of remaining on the present footing, which was one of uncertainty for Sister Giovanna and of armed quiescence on the Princess's part.

'Thank you,' said the latter, after a long time, with a bright smile, as if she had quite understood the nun's answer. 'It will be such a comfort to know that he is being well cared for, poor fellow. I believe he will be here in a few minutes.'

'We are expecting him,' answered the nun, not stirring.

Another long silence followed, and she sat so perfectly still that the Princess began to fidget, looked at the tall old clock in the corner and then compared her pretty watch with it, laid her olive-green parasol across the table, but took it off again almost immediately and dropped the tip to the floor. The Sister's impassive stillness seemed meant for a reproach and made her nervous. The certainty that the motionless woman opposite her was Angela, calmly declining to know her, was very disagreeable. She tried the excuse of pretending in her thoughts that there was still a reasonable doubt about it, but she could no longer succeed; yet to address her niece by her baptismal name would be to acknowledge herself finally beaten in the contest of coolness, after having at first succeeded in making her adversary change colour.

The ticking of the clock was so distinct that it made an echo in the high hall; the morning sun streamed across the pavement, from the cloistered garden the

chirping of a few sparrows and the sharper twitter of the house-swallow that had already nested under the eaves sounded very clearly through the closed glass door.

The Princess could not bear the silence any longer, and she looked at Sister Giovanna with a rather pinched smile.

'My dear Angela,' she said, 'there is really no reason why we should keep up this absurd little comedy any longer, is there?'

The nun did not betray the least surprise at the sudden question.

'If you have no reason for it, I have none,' she answered, but her gaze was so steady that the Princess looked away. 'I prefer to be called Sister Giovanna, however,' she added, after an instant's pause.

The Princess, though not always courageous, was naturally overbearing and rather quarrelsome, and her temper rose viciously as soon as the restraint which an artificial situation had imposed was removed.

'I really think you should not have kept me in doubt so long,' she said. 'After playing nurse to me in my own house, you can hardly have taken me for another person. But as for you, your dress has changed you so completely, and you look so much older than any one would have thought possible, that you need not be surprised if I was not quite sure it was really you!'

Her niece listened unmoved. A trained nurse, even if she be a nun, may learn a good deal about human nature in five years, and Sister Giovanna was naturally quick to perceive and slow to forget. She understood now, much better than the Princess supposed.

'I am not at all surprised,' she said, almost smiling, 'and it cannot possibly matter.'

The older woman began to think that her recollections of what she thought she had said in her delirium were nothing more than the record of a dream, but the fear of having betrayed herself still haunted her, although four months had passed, and the present opportunity of setting her mind at rest might not return. Rather than let it slip away she would be bold, if not brave.

'And besides,' she said, as if finishing her last speech, 'I believe I was more or less delirious during most of the time that you were with me. Was I not?'

Sister Giovanna was sorely tempted to speak out. But though it would be so easy to humiliate the woman who had injured her, it looked too much like vengeance; and she remembered how she had told the sick woman that she forgave, with all her heart, meaning what she said, but it had been hard to keep the passion-flower of forgiveness from fading as soon as it had opened.

'You were rather quiet on the whole,' she answered with truth, and so calmly that the Princess was relieved. 'I wish all my patients were as submissive.'

'Really? How delightful! No one ever said I was a submissive person, I am sure!'

'You were very much so. And now, since your friend has not come yet, and you will wish to wait for him, I must ask you to let me leave you, for I am on duty and must not stay here too long. Should you like to see the Mother Superior?'

Sister Giovanna rose as she spoke, for though she was

sure of herself after making the first effort, she did not mean to tell an untruth if her aunt asked a still more direct question; she was well aware, too, that she had turned very pale at the first mention of Giovanni, and she did not intend to expose herself to any further surprises which her enemy might be planning.

The Princess was disappointed now, and was not satisfied with having so greatly diminished her own anxiety. She felt that she had come into contact with a force which she could not hope to overcome, because it did not proceed only from Angela's own strength of character, but was backed by a power that was real though it was invisible. It is hard to express what I mean, but those will understand who have personally found themselves opposed by a member of any regular order whom they wish to influence. It has been well said that there is no such obstacle in life as the inert resistance of a thoroughly lazy man; but in certain circumstances that is far inferior to the silent opposition of a conscientious person belonging to a large body which declines, on grounds of belief rather than of logic, to enter into any argument. That was what Princess Chiaromonte felt.

She rose from her chair a moment after her niece had stood up.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I will wait here, if I may.'

'You are welcome.'

Sister Giovanna made a slight inclination of the head and left the hall at once. When she was gone her aunt did not resume her seat, but walked slowly up and down,

and twice, as she reached the door that led to the wards, she stood still for a second and smiled. It was all very well to be as strong as Angela, she reflected, and to have a great religious order behind one, supported by the whole body of the Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church; and it was a fine thing to have so much character, and such a beautiful, grave face, and solemn, saintly eyes; but it showed weakness to turn as white as a sheet at the mention of a man's name, though he might be dead, and in a few minutes it would be a satisfaction to note the signs of inward distress when the grave supervising nurse came face to face with the brother of the man she had loved.

That was what the Princess was thinking of when she heard the distant gate-bell tinkling, and stopped once more in her walk, preparing herself to receive Ugo Severi with an expression of cordiality and affectionate concern.

The portress opened the door into the hall and a confused sound of voices came from the passage. The Princess started slightly and then smiled, reflecting that she had never noticed the resemblance between Ugo's tone and poor Giovanni's.

Doctor Pieri entered first, tall, grave, fair-bearded, and he was looking back to be sure that the orderlies were careful. They followed him closely, bringing Captain Ugo in a chair in which he sat upright with his injured foot lying on a raised rest before him and a rug from the motor car over his knees. He wore a covert coat and a grey felt hat.

The Princess went forward with a bright smile, looking into his face.

'I have seen the head nurse,' she said, 'and you are to have the best room in the hospital, and all sorts of extra care.'

Ugo said something as the orderlies set down the chair, but almost at the same moment the Princess heard another voice. It was hard and cold, and did not match the words it spoke.

'You have been extremely kind,' said Giovanni Severi.

She had fairly good nerves, and had been in a very small measure prepared for the surprise by having heard him talking in the passage, though in a very different tone; but she started and gasped audibly as she looked up and met his resentful eyes.

'Giovanni!' she cried in amazement. 'Is it you? Are you alive?'

But she had no doubt about it, in spite of the heavy beard that hid the lower part of his face.

'Oh, yes,' he answered rather coldly. 'Quite alive, thank you.'

She held out her hand now, but it was shaking when he took it. Doctor Pieri looked on in some surprise, but said nothing. One of the orderlies rang the bell that summoned the supervising nurse.

'Where have you been all these years?' asked the Princess. 'Why have you never written to your friends?'

'That is a long story,' Giovanni answered, in the same tone as before. 'If you happen to be on friendly terms

with the Ministry, you will be doing the Government a service by not speaking of my return till it is made public.'

'How mysterious!' The Princess was recovering from her surprise.

Ugo looked from one to the other, watching their faces. It was quite clear that his brother disliked the middle-aged woman of the world now, whatever their relations had been in the past, and from her behaviour when she had recognised him it looked as if the two must have once been very intimate.

'What are we waiting for?' asked the Captain cheerfully, in order to break off the conversation.

'The supervising nurse,' answered Pieri. 'She will be here directly.'

'A nun, I suppose,' observed Giovanni carelessly. 'Old and hideous too, no doubt. Poor Ugo!'

'Not so much to be pitied as you think,' said the Princess. 'She is still young, and must have been very pretty! She is worth looking at, I assure you.'

Her own astonishment and recent emotion were already forgotten in the pleasure of looking forward to the recognition which must take place within a few moments. She had hated her niece long and unrelentingly, and she had never forgiven Giovanni for what she called in her heart his betrayal; but the reckoning was to be settled in full at last, and she knew that if Sister Giovanna could choose, she would rather pay it with her flesh and blood than meet what was before her now.

Giovanni was looking towards the door when the nun

opened it, and the strong morning light fell full on her face as she came forward. Naturally enough, her eyes were at first turned downwards towards Ugo's face, for she had already seen the Princess and Pieri was a familiar figure. She was aware that a bearded officer was standing on the other side of the chair, but she did not look at him.

Giovanni's expression changed quickly; at first he saw only a strong likeness to Angela, a striking resemblance that made him wonder whether the nun could possibly be an elder sister of hers, of whom he had never heard; but by quick degrees he became sure that it was herself. She spoke to the wounded man.

'Shall we go up to your room at once?' she asked in her soft voice, bending over him.

Before Ugo could answer, a name he did not know rang out, in a tone he had never heard. He did not recognise his brother's voice, it was so full of passion and joy, mingled with amazement, yet trembling with anxiety.

'Angela!'

Sister Giovanna straightened herself with a spring and stood transfixed, facing Giovanni. The chair was between them. In an instant, that was an age to both, sharp lines furrowed her brow, her cheeks grew hollow, and her pale, parted lips were distorted with pain. Her face was like the Virgin Mother's, at the foot of the Cross.

It was only for a moment; she threw up her arms, stiff and straight, as a man who is shot through the heart. One loud cry then, and she fell backwards.

Pieri was in time and caught her before her head struck the pavement; but though he was strong and she was slightly made, the impetus of her fall dragged him down upon one knee. Giovanni could not reach her at once, for the hospital chair with the bars by which it was carried was between them and the foremost of the orderlies stood exactly in his way. He almost knocked the man over as he dashed forwards.

The Princess was already bending over the unconscious Sister, with every appearance of profound sympathy; she was trying to loosen the wimple and gorget that confined the nun's cheeks and throat too closely, but the fastenings were unfamiliar and she could not find them. Giovanni, pale and determined, pushed her aside as he stooped to lift the woman he loved. Pieri helped him, and the Princess rose and stepped back to look on, now that she had shown her willingness to be of use. Ugo gazed at the scene with wide, astonished eyes, turning half round in his chair and grasping its arms to hold himself in the position.

'Open the glass door!' said the Doctor to the nearest orderly.

They carried Sister Giovanna into the cloistered garden, towards the stone seat by the well, where the three old nuns used to sit in the afternoon. Before they reached the place, she opened her eyes and met Giovanni's, already haggard with fear for her, but brightening wildly as her consciousness returned; for he had believed that she had fallen dead before him.

Even through the closed glass doors the Mother

Superior had heard her cry and known her voice, for the window had been open to the April sunshine. The Mother could be swift when there was need, and she was downstairs and at the well almost as soon as the two men could get there, walking slowly with their burden. Exerting a strength that amazed them, she took the young nun into her arms and sat down with her, and laid the drooping head tenderly to her heart. Her own face was as still and white as marble, but neither Giovanni nor Pieri saw her eyes.

'You may go,' she said. 'I will take care of her.'

In the presence of the strange officer she would not ask the Doctor what had happened.

'She fainted suddenly,' he said.

'Yes. I understand. Leave her to me.'

Pieri saw that Giovanni could not move of his own free will; so he passed his arm through the young man's and whispered in his ear while he drew him away.

'You must obey for the present,' he said. 'She is in no danger.'

For he had understood the truth at once, as was easy enough; and Giovanni went with him, looking back again and again and unable to speak, not yet knowing all.

When the Princess had seen the Mother Superior crossing the garden, she had drawn back within the door, and the Doctor shut it when Giovanni had come in. The woman of the world had believed that she could still face the man after what she had done, and perhaps find words that would hurt him; but when she saw his eyes, she was frightened, for she had known him well.

When he went straight towards her she made one step backwards, in bodily fear of him; but he spoke quietly and not rudely.

'It was your duty to warn us both,' he said.

That was all, but he stood looking at her, and her fright grew; for men who live long in the wilderness gather a strength that may inspire terror when they come back to the world. The Princess turned from him without answering, and left the hall.

One of the orderlies had called another nurse from within, and Ugo was taken to his room, still surprised, but already understanding, as Pieri did. The latter soon took his leave, the nurse followed him for instructions, and the brothers were alone together.

'When I left her,' Giovanni said, 'we were engaged to be married. I wrote to her just before I sailed, but she has not received the letter yet.'

'What shall you do?' asked Ugo, watching him with sympathy.

'Do? Marry her, of course! Do you suppose I have changed my mind?'

'But she is evidently a nun,' objected Ugo. 'She must have taken irrevocable vows. These nurses are not like Sisters of Charity, I believe, who make their promise for a year only and then are free during one night, to decide whether they will renew it.'

Giovanni Severi laughed, but not lightly, nor carelessly, nor scornfully. It was the short, energetic laughter of a determined man who does not believe anything impossible.

CHAPTER XIII

After a long time, Sister Giovanna lifted her head very slowly, sat up, and passed her hand over her eyes, while the Mother Superior still kept one arm round her, thinking that she might faint again at any moment. But she did not.

'Thank you,' she said, with difficulty. 'You are very good to me, Mother. I think I can walk now.'

'Not yet.'

The elder woman's hand was on her wrist, keeping her in her seat.

'I must go back to my work,' she said, but not much above a whisper.

'Not yet. When you are better, you must come to my room for a little while and rest there.'

Sister Giovanna looked old then, for her face was grey and the deep lines of suffering were like furrows of age; she seemed much older than Mother Veronica, who was over forty. A minute or two passed and she made another effort, and this time the Mother helped her. She was weak but not exactly unsteady; her feet were like leaden weights that she had to lift at every step.

When they were alone in the small room and the door was shut, the Mother Superior closed the window, too; for the cloister was very resonant and voices carried far. She made Sister Giovanna sit in the old horse-hair easy-

chair, leaning her head against the round black and white worsted cushion that was hung across the back by a cotton cord. She herself sat in the chair she used at her writing-table.

She did not know what had happened in the hall, but what she saw told her that the Sister's fainting fit had not been due only to a passing physical weakness. She herself seemed to be suffering when she spoke, and not one of all the many Sisters and novices who had come to her in distress, at one time or another, had ever seen her so much touched by pity, so humane, forbearing, and kind.

'If you would like me to understand what has happened, my dear child, you can trust me,' she said. 'If you would rather keep your secret, tell me if I can help you.'

Sister Giovanna looked at her gratefully and tried to speak, but it was hard; not that she was choking, or near to shedding tears, but her lips felt stiff and cold, like a dying man's, and would not form words. But presently they came at intervals, one by one, though not distinctly, and so low that it was not easy to hear them.

Yet Mother Veronica understood. Giovanni Severi, the man Angela had loved, the man who had been called dead for five years — he had come back from death — she had seen him with his brother — he had known her.

She was not going to faint again, but she sank forward, bending almost double, her hands on the arms of the chair, her young head bowed with woe. There was something awful in her suffering, now that she was silent.

The Mother Superior only said three words, but her voice broke as she pronounced the last.

'My poor child ——'

Her lips were livid, but she ruled the rising storm and sat quite still, her fingers twisted together and straining on her knee. If Sister Giovanna had looked up, she would have wondered how mere sympathy could be so deep and stirring. But she could not; her own struggle was too desperate. Minutes passed before she spoke again, and then there was a change in her, for her voice was much more steady.

'It was so easy to be good when he was dead.'

She had been happy an hour ago, yesterday, last week, working and waiting for the blessed end, believing that he had died to serve his country and that God would let him meet her in heaven. Why had he come back now, too late for earth, but a lifetime too soon for heaven? It had been so easy to be strong and brave and faithful for his sake, when he was dead. It was little enough that she had said, but each word had meant a page of her life. Mother Veronica heard, and she understood.

'Pray,' she said, after a long time; and her voice came as from very far away, for she too had told her story in that one syllable.

Human nature turned upon her, rebellious, with a rending cry.

'I cannot! He is alive! He is here! Don't you understand? How can I pray? For what? That he may die again? God of mercy! And if not that, can I pray to be free? Free? Free from what? Free to do

what? To die? Not even that! Others will be taken, but I shall live — thirty, forty, fifty years, knowing that he is alive — knowing that I may see him any day!'

The elder woman's white fingers twined round each other more desperately, for Sister Giovanna's face was turned full to her now, and their eyes were meeting; the young nun's were fierce with pain, but the Mother's were strangely lustreless and dull.

'No,' she said, mechanically answering the last words, 'you must not see him.'

'Not see him once?'

Sister Giovanna leaned far forwards, grasping the arms of the easy-chair, and her voice came thick and hoarse. Did the woman with the marble face think that she, too, was made of stone? Not see the man she had loved, who had been suddenly, violently dead, who was alive again, and had come back to her? The Mother could not be in earnest! If she was, why did she not answer now? Why was she sitting there, with that strange look, silently wringing her hands?

Even in her cruel distress Sister Giovanna felt a sort of wonder. Perhaps the Mother had not meant what she said, and would not speak lest she should contradict herself. The mere thought was a hope; whether for good or evil the tortured girl knew not, but it loosed her tongue.

'He will come to me!' she cried. 'He will, I tell you! You do not know him! Did you hear his voice as I did when he called me? Did you see his face? Could walls or bars keep such a man from the woman he loves? I

must face him myself, and to face him I must kill something in me — cut it out, tear it up from its roots — I am only a woman after all! A nun can be a woman still, a weak woman, who has loved a man very, very dearly ——'

'Oh, Angela, hush! For the love of Heaven, my child, my child!'

To Sister Giovanna's unspeakable amazement, the unbending nature was breaking down, the marble saint, with the still white face, who had bidden her pray, and never see Giovanni again. She felt herself lifted from her seat and clasped in a despairing embrace; she felt the small nervous frame shaking in the storm of an emotion she could not understand, though she knew it was as great as her own and as terrible to bear, and that the heart that beat against hers was breaking, too.

Neither shed a tear; tears would have been heavenly refreshment, but they would not come. Another moment and Angela felt herself sinking back into her chair, and when she opened her eyes the Mother Superior was at the table, half seated, half lying across it, on the heaps of papers and account-books, and her outstretching hands clasped the foot of the old crucifix beside the leaden inkstand.

'Miserere mei, Domine!'

The voice of her prayer broke the stillness like a silver bell. Then she began to recite the greatest of the penitential psalms.

'Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice.'

And by long habit, yet with some dim hope of peace, Sister Giovanna responded:

'Let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.'

They said it to the end, verse answering verse, and the prayer of the King-Poet stilled the throbbing of hurts too deep to heal.

Two hours after she had fainted in the hall, Sister Giovanna was doing her work in the hospital again as usual. A wonderful amount of physical resistance can be got out of moral conviction, and there is no such merciful shelter for mental distress as a uniform, from the full dress of a field-marshal to a Sister of Charity's cornet.

Of the persons who had been witnesses of the scene, the Doctor and Ugo Severi could be trusted, and Princess Chiaromonte was too much afraid of Giovanni to brew gossip about his love-affair. There remained the two orderlies, who could not be prevented from telling the story to their wives and friends if they liked; but they were trusty, middle-aged men of good character; they shared the affectionate admiration for Sister Giovanna which almost every one in the Convent hospital felt for her, and they would be the very last to say a word to her discredit. These circumstances account well enough for the fact that the story did not get into the newspapers at the time.

Sister Giovanna went back to her work, but she did not go near Ugo Severi, and she gave strict orders that his brother, if he came to see him again during the day,

was to be accompanied to the door of the room by an orderly. As Ugo had swallowed nothing but a cup of black coffee before coming to the hospital, and was therefore in a condition to take ether, Pieri had given notice that he would operate on the injured foot at two o'clock. There would be no need for the presence of the supervising nurse, who would have no difficulty in keeping out of Giovanni's way for the present, as he would certainly not be allowed to roam the hospital in search of her.

She meant to meet him once and alone, no matter how she might be hindered, and nothing that the Mother Superior or Monsignor Saracinesca could say should make it impossible. She knew that he would try every means of seeing her, and when he succeeded in making an opportunity which she could accept, she would take it, come what might; till then, she must wait, and while she was waiting she would find the strength she needed.

That was her plan, and it was simple enough. She might be mistaken about many questions, but nothing could make that seem wrong which her conscience told her was right. And it was right to see him once; she was sure of it. The rest was confused and uncertain and she took no thought what she should say; she only knew she must make him understand, though it would be hard, and when that was done, she would not see him again while she lived.

She meant to make that final parting a certainty by going to Rangoon with the next mission; nothing should change her determination now.

Her feet were heavy that day, and her voice was dull

and muffled when she gave her orders; but she made no mistakes. Many a man has fought more stubbornly and bravely after a wound and a fall than at the outset, and few men could tell themselves that they were braver than Sister Giovanna was when she recovered control of her actions after the first stunning shock.

She stayed in her office as much of the time as possible. In due course the assistant head-nurse came to report that Pieri had finished his work and that Captain Ugo had recovered well from the ether; his brother was with him and would stay till eight o'clock, the hour at which all visitors were required to leave the hospital except in cases of extreme danger. Sister Giovanna nodded and wrote a few lines in the day-book.

It was then half-past three. Clearly Giovanni's plan was to spend as many hours as possible under the roof, in the hope of seeing her; for though the operation had been a long one, requiring the skill of a great surgeon to perform it well, Ugo was in no danger from it, and it might be supposed that a man who had just come back from such an experience as Giovanni had lived through would wish to see a few old friends on the first day of his return, or would be obliged, at the very least, to attend to some necessary business. Sister Giovanna did not know that his return was being purposely kept a secret from the public press, and that he was far safer from reporters while he stayed in the Convent hospital than he could be in his lodging.

At five o'clock the door of her office opened, and to her surprise she saw Monsignor Saracinesca standing before

her, hat in hand. She could not remember that she had ever seen him there before, but it was an office, after all, and there was no reason why he should not come to it if he had business with her. She rose to receive him. He shut the door, which was the only one, bowed gravely, and took one of the two spare rush-bottomed chairs and seated himself, before he spoke.

'The Mother Superior sent for me,' he said, 'and I have been with her an hour. She has asked me to come to you. Are you at leisure?'

'Unless I am called. I am on duty.'

He noticed the muffled tone and the slowness of her speech. She sat facing him, on the other side of the plain table, her open report-book before her.

'You will not blame the Mother Superior for sending me, Sister. She is in the deepest distress for you. You must have seen that, when you spoke with her this morning.'

'She was more than kind.'

Monsignor Saracinesca sighed, but the nun did not notice it. Now that she knew why he had come, she needed all her strength and courage again.

He went on quietly with his short explanation. Mother Veronica had told him of what had happened in the hall; he had known the rest long ago from Sister Giovanna herself. That was the substance, and he wasted no words. Then he paused, and she knew what was coming next, for he would speak of a possible meeting; but how he would regard that she could not guess, and she waited steadily for the blow if it was to be one.

'The Mother Superior thinks that you should not see him,' he said.

'I know. She told me so.'

'I do not agree with her,' said Monsignor Saracinesca slowly.

The nun turned her face from the afternoon light, but said nothing; with the greatest sacrifice of her life before her she should not feel joy rising like the dawn in her eyes, at the mere thought of seeing the man whose love she must renounce.

'We are human,' said the churchman, 'and our victories must be human, to be worth anything. It was in His humanity that Christ suffered and overcame. It is not victory to slink from the fight and shut oneself up in a fortress that is guarded by others. Men and women must be good men and women in this world if they hope to be saints hereafter, and there is no such thing as inactive goodness.'

Sister Giovanna looked at him again, but still she did not speak.

'Though I am a priest,' continued Monsignor Saracinesca, 'I am a man of the world in the sense of having belonged to it, and I now live less apart from it than I could wish, though it is not such a thoroughly bad place as those say who do not know it. I do not feel that I got rid of all obligations to those who still belong to it when I was ordained, and I do not think that when you took the veil in a working order, you dropped all obligation to the persons with whom you had lived till then. In doing so, you might be depriving some one else of a right.'

Sister Giovanna listened to this exposition in silence and tried to follow it.

'In my opinion,' the prelate went on, 'Giovanni Severi has a just claim to see you. I speak under authority and I may be wrong, but it can only be a matter of judgment and of opinion, and since your Mother Superior has asked for mine, I give it as well as I can. You are not a cloistered nun, Sister. There is no reason why you should not receive a friend whom you have believed to be dead for years and who has unexpectedly come back to life.'

'Back to the life I left for his sake!'

Again she looked away from the light, but her face could not turn whiter than it was.

'It was terribly sudden,' said Monsignor Saracinesca, after a moment's pause. 'You will no doubt wait a few days before seeing him, till you feel quite able to face what must be a very painful interview.'

'I am not afraid of it now. I was weak when we recognised each other. I cannot quite remember — I heard him call me and I saw his eyes ——'

'And you must have fainted. You were carried out to the well at once.'

'Who carried me?' asked the nun quickly.

'Doctor Pieri and Giovanni Severi.'

She made a slight movement.

'He carried me!'

She spoke almost unconsciously, and a very faint glow rose through her paleness, as when white glass is warmed an instant in the mouth of the furnace and then drawn back and quickly cooled again.

'Shall I talk with him before you meet?' asked the churchman presently.

Sister Giovanna did not answer at once; she seemed to be thinking.

'You know better than any one what my life has been,' she said at last. 'It was to you that I went for advice five years ago, and again before I took the veil. If you had thought it even distantly possible that he might be alive, you would not have let me take final vows.'

'Heaven forbid!' answered Monsignor Saracinesca very earnestly.

'Though I believed him dead, you knew that I loved him with all my heart.'

'Yes. As dearly as when you had last seen him alive.'

'I love him still. Is that wrong?'

'No.'

He said the word without hesitation, in all sincerity and true conviction, but the nun had expected another answer; a quick movement of the head showed that she was surprised.

'Are you sure?' she asked in a low and wondering tone.

'Yes, because I am sure that your love for him is as innocent as it ever was. The religious life is not meant to kill human affection. Saint Benedict loved his sister Scholastica devotedly; Saint Francis was probably more sincerely attached to Saint Clare than to any living person.'

'I only know that I love him as dearly as ever,' said Sister Giovanna.

The churchman looked at her keenly for a moment, and she did not avoid his eyes.

'Would you break your vows for him?' he asked, with sudden directness.

The nun started as if he had struck her and half rose from her chair.

'Break my vows?' she cried, her eyes blazing with indignation.

But Monsignor Saracinesca only nodded and laid his thin hand flat on the table, towards her. She sank to her seat again.

'Then I know that, although you may love him more than any one in the world, you do not love him better than the work you have promised to do.'

'Heaven forbid!'

He had used the very same expression a few moments earlier, but with a different tone; for him it had been an asseveration of good faith, but with her it was more like a prayer. She had resented his question as if it had been an insult, but when he showed how much he trusted her, she began to distrust herself. She would die the martyr's death rather than break her vows in deed, but she was too diffident of her own womanhood not to fear a fall from the dignity of heartfelt resignation to the inward ignominy of an earthly regret. Besides, 'the work she had promised to do' had been promised for his sake, not for its own; not for any gain to her soul, but in the earnest hope that it might profit his, by God's mercy. Since he was not dead, but alive, the chief purpose of it died with his return to life. She did not

love the work she had promised to do more than she loved him; that was not true, and never had been. All had been for him — her vow, her work, and her prayers. Heaven forbid, indeed, that she should now set him before them; yet it was hard not to do so and there was only one possible way; in a changed sense they must be given for him still, and for his salvation, else she could not give at all.

Monsignor Saracinesca had watched her progress from her noviciate to her present position of responsibility, and had often spoken of her with the Mother Superior. He would not have advised every nun to do what he thought best in her case. There was not another in the community, except the Mother herself, whom he would have trusted so fully. But, being what she was, his honourable sense of justice to a man who had suffered much and must suffer more impelled him to act as he did. As he himself said, it was a matter of opinion and judgment, and his own approved the course. Those may blame him who think otherwise, but no one can find fault with Sister Giovanna for following his advice; she had a right to believe that it was the best, and as for herself, she had never hesitated. The mere suggestion that she should not see Giovanni at least once and alone looked to her outrageous and contrary to all sense, as perhaps it was.

Monsignor Saracinesca would see him first and arrange the meeting. He thought it should take place in the cloistered garden.

'Why not here, in my office?' asked the nun.

But the churchman objected. If the two were to talk together, out of hearing, they must not be out of sight. Never, under any circumstances, should any one be able to say that there had been any secrecy about their interview. He himself would bring Giovanni to the place and the Mother Superior would accompany the nun. He and the Mother would withdraw into the hall and wait until Sister Giovanna dismissed Severi. The Mother would then join her, and Monsignor Saracinesca would go away with Giovanni.

In order to forestall evil speaking more effectually, the two should meet on the afternoon of the day on which the nun's week of duty as supervising nurse came to an end. On that evening she would go away to nurse a private case, and before that patient was recovered, Ugo Severi would certainly be well enough to go home, and Giovanni's daily visits to the hospital would have ceased. It would thus be easy to prove that after their only interview, in what might be called a public place, they had not been within the same walls at the same time.

No one who has watched the politics of the so-called 'socialist' party in Rome during the past twenty years will wonder at these precautions nor even call them exaggerated. To all intents and purposes the 'Vatican question' has ceased to exist; the Italian Government may fairly be said to be at peace with the Church; the old bitterness may survive amongst certain prejudiced people, chiefly in small towns, but the spirit of this time is a spirit of good-will and mutual forbearance, and the

forces that were once so fiercely opposed actually work together for the common good in many more cases than the world knows of. The first article of the Italian Constitution states that the religion of the Kingdom is that of the Roman Catholic Church; it is, and it will continue to be, and no attempt will ever be made on the part of the Monarchy to change or to cancel that opening clause. The danger to which the Church is exposed lies in another quarter, and threatens not only the Church, but Christianity in all its forms; not only Christianity, but the Monarchy; and not the Monarchy only, but all constitutional and civilised government. It is anarchy; and though it boasts itself to be socialism, true socialists disclaim it and its doings and all its opinions. If it can be so far honoured as to be counted as a party, it is the party that murdered King Humbert, that assassinated the Empress of Austria, and that would sooner or later kill the Pope, if he left the safe refuge which some persons still insist on calling his prison.

It is the party that continually spies upon all religious and charitable institutions in Rome, and does not hesitate to invent stories of crime outright when it fails to detect one of those little flaws which its press magnifies to stains of abomination.

Monsignor Saracinesca understood these things better than the others concerned, and at least as well as any one in Rome. As for Giovanni, he had known him a little in former days and took him to be a man of honour, who would submit to any conditions necessary for protecting the nun from calumny. But he could hardly

believe that the young officer's feelings had undergone no change in five years, for he judged men as most men judge each other. It was one thing to fall in love with a charming young girl in her first season; it was quite another to love her faithfully for five years, without ever seeing her or hearing from her, and to feel no disappointment on finding her as much changed as Angela was now, pale, sorrow-worn, and of no particular age. The true bloom of youth is something real, but it rarely lasts more than two years; it is as subtle and indescribable as the bloom of growing roses, which is gone within an hour after they are cut, though their beauty may be preserved for many days. There was the nun's habit, too, and the veil and wimple, proclaiming another and a greater change from which there was no return.

Ippolito Saracinesca had never been in love, even in his early youth; it was no wonder that he was mistaken in such a man as Giovanni Severi. The only danger he reckoned with lay in Sister Giovanna's own heart, and he felt that he could count on her courage, her self-respect, and most of all on her profoundly religious nature. No danger is ever overcome without danger, said Mimos. In the case of such a woman it was better, for her sake, to accept such risk as there might be in a single interview which must be decisive and final, than to let her live on haunted by disturbing memories and harassed by regret.

CHAPTER XIV

It was raining when Giovanni and Monsignor Saracinesca rang at the door of the Convent. The Mother Superior had ordered two rush-bottomed chairs to be brought out of the hall and placed under the shelter of the cloister just on one side of the glass door; for Sister Giovanna was to receive a visit, as she explained, from an officer who had known her father and had business with her. Such things had happened before in the community, and the lay sister was not surprised. She carried the chairs out and set them in what she considered a proper position, about two yards apart and both facing the garden. The rain fell softly and steadily, the sky was of an even dove-grey, and the smell of the damp earth and the early spring flowers filled the cloister.

Giovanni was a soldier and would impose his military punctuality upon the prelate, who, like most churchmen, had a clearer idea of eternity than of definite time. As the Convent clock was striking, therefore, the Mother Superior and Sister Giovanna came down the narrow stairs, for they had been together a quarter of an hour, though they had scarcely exchanged half-a-dozen words. They walked slowly round under the vaulted cloister, the Mother on the right, the nun on the left, according to the rigid custom, and they had just turned the last

corner and were in sight of the two chairs when the glass door opened.

Monsignor Saracinesca's voice was heard.

'Remember what I have said. I trust you, and you know that the cloister is open to every one.'

'Yes,' Giovanni answered, as both appeared on the threshold.

They saw the two nuns already near and made a few steps to meet them. Monsignor Saracinesca greeted the Mother, who bent her head as she answered him; Giovanni stood still, his eyes fixed on Angela's face. But she looked steadily down at the flagstones, and her hands were hidden under the broad scapular of white cloth that hung straight down from under her gorget to her feet.

There are no awkward silences when churchmen or nuns meet, still less if the meeting takes place by appointment, for each knows exactly what he or she is expected to say and says it, deliberately and without hesitation. In less than a minute after they had met, the Mother and Monsignor Saracinesca entered the hall together and closed the glass door after them. The soldier and the nun were face to face at last.

As soon as Giovanni heard the door shut he made one step forward and stretched out both his hands, thinking to take hers. She made no movement, but raised her eyes, and when he saw them, they were still and dull. Then she slowly held out her right hand, and it was cold and inert when he took it. She drew back at once and sat down, and he took the other chair, bringing it a little

nearer, and turning it so that he could see her. He was cruelly disappointed, but he was the first to speak.

'I thought you were glad to know that I am alive,' he said coldly, 'but I see that you were only frightened the other day. I am sorry to have startled you.'

She steadied herself before answering.

'Yes, I was startled. Your letter did not reach me till afterwards.'

The garden was whirling before her as if she were being put under ether, and the little twisted columns that upheld the arches of the cloister chased each other furiously, till she thought she was going to fall from her chair. She could not hear what he said next, for a surging roar filled her ears as when the surf breaks at an angle on a long beach and sounds one deep, uninterrupted note. He was explaining why the mail steamer had not reached Italy several days before him, but she did not understand; she only knew when he ceased speaking.

'It is the inevitable — always the inevitable,' she said, making a desperate effort and yet not saying anything she wished to say.

But her tone told him how deeply she was moved, and his fiery energy broke out.

'Nothing is inevitable!' he cried. 'There is nothing that cannot be undone, if I can live to undo it!'

That was not what she expected, if she expected anything, but it brought back her controlling self that had been dazed and wandering and had left her almost helpless. She started and turned her face full to his, but drawing back in her chair.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Angela!'

The appeal of love was in his voice, as he bent far forward, but she raised her hand in warning.

'No, "Sister Giovanna," please,' she said, checking him, though gently.

He felt the slight rebuke, and remembered that the place was public to the community.

'It was not by chance that you took my name with the veil,' he said, almost in a whisper. 'Did you love me then?'

'I believed that you had been dead two years,' answered the nun slowly.

'But did you love me still, when I was dead?'

'Yes.'

She did not lower her voice, for she was not ashamed, but she looked down. He forgot her rebuke, and called her by her old name again, that had meant life and hope and everything to him through years of captivity.

'Angela!' He did not heed her gesture now, nor the quick word she spoke. 'Yes, I will call you Angela — you love me now ——'

She checked him again, with more energy.

'Hush! If you cannot be reasonable, I shall go away!'

'Reasonable!'

There was contempt in his tone, but he sat upright again and said no more.

'Listen to me,' said Sister Giovanna, finding some strength in the small advantage she had just gained. 'I have not let you come here in order to torment you

or cheat you, and I mean to tell you the truth. You have a right to know it, and I still have the right to tell it, because there is nothing in it of which I am ashamed. Will you hear me quietly, whatever I say?'

'Yes, I will. But I cannot promise not to answer, when you have done.'

'There is no answer to what I am going to say. It is to be final.'

'We shall see,' said Giovanni gravely, though with no conviction.

But the nun was satisfied, for he was clearly willing to listen. The meeting had disturbed her peace even more than she had expected, but she had done her best during several days to prepare herself for it, and had found strength to decide what she must say, and to repeat it over and over again till she knew it by heart.

'You were reported to be dead,' she began — 'killed with the rest of them. You had your share in the great military funeral, and I, and all the world, believed that you were buried with your comrades. Your name is engraved with theirs upon their tomb, in the roll of honour, as that of a man who perished in his country's service. I went there with Madame Bernard before I began my noviciate, and I went again, for the last time, before I took the veil. I had loved you living and I loved you dead.'

Giovanni moved as if he were going to speak, but she would not let him.

'No, hear me!' she cried anxiously. 'I offered God my life and my strength for your sake, and if I have done

any good here in five years, as novice and nun, it has been in the hope that it might be accepted for you, if your soul needed it. Though you may not believe in such things, do you at least understand me?'

'Indeed I do, and I am grateful — most grateful.'

She was a little disappointed by his tone, for he spoke with an evident effort.

'It was gladly given,' she said. 'But now you have come back to life ——'

She hesitated. With all her courage and strength, she could not quite control her memory, and the words she had prepared so carefully were suddenly confused. Giovanni completed the sentence for her in his own way.

'I have come to life to find you dead for me, as I have been dead for you. Is that what you were going to say?'

'She was still hesitating.

'Was it that?' he insisted.

'No,' she answered, at last. 'Not dead for you — alive for you.'

He would have caught at a straw, and the joy came into his face as he quickly held out his hand to her; but she would not take it: hers were both hidden under her white cloth scapular and she shrank from him. The light went out of his eyes.

'I might have known!' he said, deeply disappointed. 'You do not mean it. I suppose you will explain that you are alive to pray for me!'

'You promised to listen quietly, whatever I might say.'

'Yes.' He controlled himself. 'I will,' he added, after a moment. 'Go on.'

'I am not changed,' said Sister Giovanna, 'but my life is. That is what I meant by the inevitable. No person can undo what I have done' — Giovanni moved impatiently — 'no power can loose me from my vows.'

In spite of himself, the man's temper broke out.

'You are mad,' he answered roughly, 'or else you do not know that you can be free.'

'Hush!' cried the nun, trying once more to check him. 'Your promise — remember it!'

'I break it! I will not listen meekly to such folly! Before you took the vow, you had given me your word, as I gave you mine, that we would be man and wife, and since I am not dead, no promise or oath made after that is binding! I know that you love me still, as you did then, and if you will not try to free yourself, then by all you believe, and by all I honour, I will set you free!'

It was a challenge if it was not a threat, and Sister Giovanna defended herself as she could. But she was painfully conscious that something in her responded with a thrill to the cry of the pursuer. Nevertheless, she answered with a firm refusal.

'You cannot make me do what I will not,' she said.

'I can and I will!' he retorted vehemently. 'It is monstrous that you should be bound by a promise made in ignorance, under a wretched mistake, on a false report that I was dead!'

'We were not even formally betrothed ——'

'We loved each other,' interrupted Giovanni, 'and we had told each other so. That is enough. We belong

to each other just as truly as if we were man and wife ——'

'Even if we were,' said the nun, interrupting him in her turn, 'if I had taken my vows in the belief that my husband had been dead for years, I would not ask to be released!'

He stared at her, his temper suddenly chilled in amazement.

'But if it were a mistake,' he objected, 'if the Pope offered you a dispensation, would you refuse it?'

Sister Giovanna was prepared, for she had thought of that.

'If you had given a man your word of honour to pay a debt you owed him, would you break your promise if you suddenly found that you could use the money in another way, which would give you the keenest pleasure?'

'That is quite different! How can you ask such an absurd question?'

'It is not absurd, and the case is not so different as you think. I have given my word to God in heaven, and I must pay my debt.'

Giovanni was indignant again, and rebelled.

'You used to tell me that your God was just!'

'And I have heard you say that your only god was honour!' retorted the nun.

'Yes!' he answered hotly. 'It is! Honour teaches that the first promise given must be fulfilled before all others!'

'I have been taught that vows made to God must not be broken.'

She rose, as if the speech were final. Though they had been talking only a few minutes, she already felt that she could not bear much more.

'Surely you are not going already!' he cried, starting to his feet.

Sister Giovanna turned so that she was face to face with him.

'What is there left to say?' she asked, with a great effort.

'Everything! I told you that I would answer when you had finished, and now that you have nothing left to say, you must hear me! You said you would ——'

'I said that there could be no answer.' Nevertheless she waited, motionless.

'But there is! The answer is that I will free you from the slavery to which you have sold your soul! The answer is, I love you, and it is yourself I love, the woman you are now, not the memory of your shadow from long ago, but you, you, your very self!'

Half out of his mind, he tried to seize her by the arm, to draw her to him; but he only caught her sleeve, and dropped it as she sprang back with a lightness and maiden grace that almost drove him mad. She drew herself up, offended and hurt.

'Remember what I am, and where you are!'

Giovanni's manner changed so suddenly that she would have been suspicious, if she had not been too much disturbed to reason. She fancied that she still controlled him.

'You are right,' he said; 'I beg your pardon. Only tell me when I may see you again.'

'Not for a long time — not till you can give me your word that you will control yourself. Till then, we must say good-bye.'

He was so quiet, all at once, that it was easier to say the word than she had expected.

'No,' he answered, 'not good-bye, for even if you will not see me, I shall be near you.'

'Near? Where?'

'I am living in my brother's rooms at the Magazine. I am in charge till he gets well. I asked permission to take his place on the day I arrived, from the Minister himself.'

'You have taken his place!' She could not keep her anxiety out of her voice.

'Yes, and I hope to get a shot at the fellow who wounded Ugo. But the post suits me, for the upper part of this house is in sight of my windows. If you look out towards the river, you can see where I live.'

He spoke so gently that she lingered instead of leaving him at once, as she had meant to do.

'And besides,' he went on, in the same tone, 'I shall come here every day until my brother can go home. I may meet you at any moment, in going to his room. You will not refuse to speak to me, will you?'

He smiled. He seemed quite changed within a few moments. But she shook her head.

'You will not see me here again,' she answered, 'for my week's turn as supervising nurse will be over this evening and I am going to a private case.'

'To-night?' Giovanni asked, with a little surprise.

'Yes, to-night.'

'Do you mean to say that you do not even have a day's rest after being on duty a whole week? What a life! But they must give you a few hours, surely! What time do you go off duty, and at what time do you go to your new patient? I suppose they send for you?'

'Yes, at about eight o'clock. That is the usual time, but I never know long beforehand. Arrangements of that sort are all made by the Mother Superior.'

It did not seem unnatural that he should ask questions about her occupation, now that he was calmer, nor could she think it wrong to answer them. Any one might have listened to what they were saying.

'I daresay you do not even know where you are going this evening?' Giovanni said.

She thought that he was talking only to keep her with him a little longer. Overstrained as she had been, it was a relief to exchange a few words quietly before parting from him.

'It is true,' she answered, after a moment's thought. 'I daresay the Mother Superior mentioned the name of the family, but if she did I have forgotten it. I shall get my instructions before I leave the house, as usual. I only know that it is a new case.'

'Yes,' Giovanni said, as if it did not interest him further. 'All the same, it is a shame that you should be made to work so hard! Before I go, tell me that you have forgiven me for losing my head just now. I think you have, but I want to hear you say so. Will you?'

It seemed little enough to forgive. Sister Giovanna

felt so much relieved by his change of manner that she was even able to smile faintly. If he would always be as gentle, she could perhaps ask leave to see him again in six months. Now that the storm was over, it was a pure and innocent happiness to be with him.

'You will not do it again,' she said simply. 'Of course I forgive you.'

'Thank you. It is all I can expect, since you have told me that I was asking the impossible. You see Madame Bernard sometimes, do you not?'

'Yes. Almost every week.'

'She will give me news of you. I suppose I must not send you a message by her. That would be against the rules!'

'The message might be!' Sister Giovanna actually smiled again. 'But if it is not, there is no reason why she should not bring me a greeting from you.'

'But not a letter?'

'No. I would not take it from her. It would have to be given to the Mother Superior. If she were willing to receive it at all, it would be her duty to read it, and she would judge whether it should be given to me or not.'

'Is that the rule?' Giovanni asked, more indifferently than she had expected.

'Yes. It is the rule in our order. If it were not, who could prevent any one from writing to a nun?'

'I was not finding fault with it. I must not keep you standing here any longer. If you will not sit down and talk a little more, I had better be going.'

'Yes. You have been here long enough, I think.'

He did not press her. He was so submissive that if he had begged permission to stay a few minutes more she would have consented, and she wished he would, when she saw him holding out his hand to say good-bye; but she was too well pleased at having dominated his wild temper to make a suggestion which might betray weakness in herself.

She took his hand and was a little surprised to find it as cold as hers had been when he came; but his face was not pale — she forgot that five years of Africa had bronzed it too much for paleness — and he was very quiet and collected. She went to the door of the hall with him and opened it before he could do so for himself.

They parted almost like mere acquaintances, he bowing on the step, she bending her head. The Mother Superior and Monsignor Saracinesca had been sitting by the table, talking, but both had risen and come forward as soon as the pair appeared outside the glass door. It all passed off very satisfactorily, and the Mother Superior gave a little sigh of relief when the churchman and the soldier went away together, leaving her and Sister Giovanna standing in the hall. She felt that Monsignor Saracinesca had been right, after all, in approving the meeting, and that she had been mistaken in thinking that it must endanger the nun's peace.

She said nothing, but she was quietly pleased, and a rare, sweet smile softened her marble features. She asked no questions about what had passed, being quite sure that all was well, and that if there had ever been anything to fear, it was gone.

The prelate and Giovanni walked along the quiet street in silence for some distance; then Severi stopped suddenly, as many Italians do when they are going to say something important.

'You will help me, I am sure,' he said, speaking impetuously from the first. 'Though I never knew you well in old times, I always felt that you were friendly. You will not allow her to ruin both our lives, will you?'

'What sort of help do you want from me?' asked the tall churchman, bending his eyes to the energetic young face.

'The simplest thing in the world!' Giovanni answered. 'We were engaged to be married when I left with that ill-fated expedition. She thought me dead. She must be released from her vows at once! That is all.'

'It is out of the question,' answered Monsignor Saracinesca, with supernal calm.

'Out of the question?' Giovanni frowned angrily. 'Do you mean that it cannot be done? But it is only common justice! She is as much my wife as if you had married us and I had left her at the altar to go to Africa! You cannot be in earnest!'

'I am. In the first place, there is no ground for granting a dispensation.'

'No ground?' cried Severi indignantly. 'We loved each other, we meant to marry! Is that no reason?'

'No. You were not even formally betrothed, either before your parish priest or the mayor. Without a solemn promise in the proper form and before witnesses,

there is no binding engagement to marry. That is not only canonical law, but Italian common law, too.'

'We had told each other,' Giovanni objected. 'That was enough.'

'You are wrong,' answered Monsignor Saracinesca gently. 'The Church will do nothing that the law would not do, and the law would not release Sister Giovanna, or any one else, from a legal obligation taken under the same circumstances as the religious one she has assumed.'

'What do you mean?'

'This. If, instead of becoming a nun, Angela had married another man after you were lost, Italian law would not annul the marriage in order that she might become your wife.'

'Of course not!'

'Then why should the Church annul an obligation which is quite as solemn as marriage?'

Giovanni thought he had caught the churchman in a fallacy.

'I beg your pardon,' he replied. 'I was taught as a boy that marriage is a sacrament, but I never heard that taking the veil was one!'

'Quite right, in principle. In reality, it is considered, for women, the equivalent of ordination, and therefore as being of the nature of a sacrament.'

'I am not a theologian, to discuss equivalents,' retorted Giovanni roughly.

'Very true, but a man who knows nothing of mathematics may safely accept the statement of a mathematician about a simple problem. That is not the point,

however. If you remember, I said that "under the same circumstances" the Church would not do what the law would not. The Church considers a nun's final vows to be as binding under its regulations as the law considers that any civil contract is. The "circumstances" are therefore exactly similar.'

Giovanni was no match for his cool antagonist in an argument. He cut the discussion short by a direct question.

'Is it in the Pope's power to release Sister Giovanna from her vows, or not?'

'Yes. It is — in principle.'

'Then put your principles into practice and make him do it!' cried the soldier rudely.

Monsignor Saracinesca was unmoved by this attack, which he answered with calm dignity.

'My dear Captain,' he said, 'in the first place, no one can "make" the Pope do things. That is not a respectful way of speaking.'

Giovanni was naturally courteous and he felt that he had gone too far.

'I beg your pardon,' he answered. 'I mean no disrespect to the Pope, though I tell you frankly that I do not believe in much, and not at all in his authority. What I ask is common justice and your help as a friend. I ask you to go to him and lay the case before him fairly, as before a just man, which I heartily believe him to be. You will see that he will do what you admit is in his power and give Sister Giovanna her dispensation.'

'If you and she had been married before your disappearance,' argued the churchman, 'His Holiness would assuredly not refuse. If you had been solemnly betrothed before your parish priest as well as legally promised in marriage at the Capitol, he might make an exception, though a civil betrothal is valid only for six months, under Italian law. But there was no marriage and no such engagement.'

Giovanni found himself led into argument again.

'We had intended to bind ourselves formally,' he objected. 'I have heard it said by priests that everything depends on the intention and that without it the most solemn sacrament is an empty show! Will you doubt our intention if I give you my word that it was mine, and if Sister Giovanna assures you that it was hers?'

'Certainly not! The Pope would not doubt you either, I am sure.'

'Then, in the name of all that is just and right, what is the obstacle? If you admit that the intention is the one important point, and that it existed, what ground have you left?'

'That is begging the question, Captain. It is true that without the intention a sacrament is an empty show, but the intention without the sacrament is of no more value than intention without performance would be in law. Less, perhaps. There is another point, however, which you have quite overlooked. If a request for a dispensation were even to be considered, it ought to come from Sister Giovanna herself.'

'And you will never allow her to ask for her freedom!' cried Giovanni angrily. 'That settles it, I suppose! Oh, the tyranny of the Church!'

Monsignor Saracinesca's calm was not in the least disturbed by this outbreak, and he answered with unruffled dignity.

'That is easily said, Captain. You have just been speaking with Sister Giovanna and I daresay you talked of this. What was her answer?'

'She is under the influence of her surroundings, of course! What could I expect?'

But the churchman had a right to a more direct reply.

'Did she refuse to listen to your suggestion that she should leave her order?' he asked.

Giovanni did not like to admit the fact, and paused a moment before answering; but he was too truthful to quibble.

'Yes, she did.'

'What reason did she give for refusing?'

'None!'

'Did she merely say, "No, I will not"?'

'You are cross-examining me!' Giovanni fancied that he had a right to be offended.

'No,' protested Monsignor Saracinesca, 'or at least not with the intention of catching you in your own words. You made an unfair assertion; I have a right to ask a fair question. If I were not a priest, but simply Ippolito Saracinesca, and if you accused me or my family of unjust dealings, you would be glad to give me an opportunity of defending my position, as man to man. But

because I am a priest you deny me that right. Are you just?'

'I did not accuse you personally,' argued the younger man. 'I meant that the Church would never allow Sister Giovanna to ask for her freedom.'

'The greater includes the less,' replied the other. 'The Church is my family, it includes myself, and I claim the right to defend it against an unjust accusation. Sister Giovanna is as free to ask for a dispensation as you were to resign from the army when you were ordered to join an expedition in which you nearly lost your life.'

'You say so!' Severi was incredulous.

'It is the truth. Sister Giovanna has devoted herself to a cause in which she too may risk her life.'

'The risk a nurse runs nowadays is not great!'

'You are mistaken. If she carries out her intention, she will be exposed to a great danger.'

'What intention?' asked Giovanni, instantly filled with anxiety.

'She has asked permission to join the other Sisters of the order who are going out to Rangoon to nurse the lepers there.'

'Lepers!' Severi's features were convulsed with horror. 'She, nurse lepers! It is not possible! It is certain death.'

'No, it is not certain death, by any means, but you will admit the risk.'

Giovanni was beside himself in an instant.

'She shall not go!' he cried furiously. 'You shall not make her kill herself, make her commit suicide, for

your glorification — that what you call your Church may add another martyr to its death-roll! You shall not, I say! Do you hear me?' He grasped the prelate's arm roughly. 'If you must have martyrs, go yourselves! Risk your own lives for your own glory, instead of sacrificing women on your altars — women who should live to be wives and mothers, an honour to mankind!'

'You are utterly unjust ——'

'No, I am human, and I will not tolerate your human sacrifice! I am a man, and I will not let the woman I love be sent to a horrible death, to delight your Moloch of a God!'

'Captain Severi, you are raving.'

Giovanni's fiery rage leapt from invective to sarcasm.

'Raving! That is your answer, that is the sum of your churchman's argument! A man who will not let you make a martyr of the woman he adores is raving! Do you find that in Saint Thomas Aquinas, or in Saint Augustine, or in Saint Jerome?' He dropped his voice and suddenly spoke with cold deliberation. 'She shall not go. I swear that I will make it impossible.'

Monsignor Saracinesca shook his head.

'If that is an oath,' he said, 'it is a foolish one. If it is a threat, it is unworthy of you.'

'Take it how you will. It is my last word.'

'May you never regret it,' answered the prelate, lifting his three-cornered hat; for Giovanni was saluting, with the evident intention of leaving him at once.

So they parted.

CHAPTER XV

A CARRIAGE came early for Sister Giovanna that evening, and the footman sent in a message by the portress. The patient was worse, he said, and the doctor hoped that the nurse would come as soon as she conveniently could. She came down in less than five minutes, in her wide black cloak, carrying her little black bag in her hand. It was raining heavily and she drew the hood up over her head before she left the threshold, though the servant was holding up a large umbrella.

The portress had asked the usual questions of him as soon as he presented himself, but Sister Giovanna repeated them. Was the carriage from the Villino Barini? It was. To take the nurse who was wanted for Baroness Barini? Yes; the Signora Baronessa was worse, and that was why the carriage had come half-an-hour earlier. The door of the brougham was shut with a sharp snap, the footman sprang to the box with more than an average flunkey's agility, and the nun was driven rapidly away. Knowing that the house she was going to was one of those little modern villas on the slope of the Janiculum which have no arched entrance and often have no particular shelter at the front door, she did not take the trouble to push her hood back, as she would need it again so soon.

In about ten minutes the carriage stopped, the foot-

man jumped down with his open umbrella in his hand, and let her into the house. Before she could ask whether she had better leave her cloak in the hall, the man was leading the way upstairs; it was rather dark, but she felt that the carpet under her feet was thick and soft. She followed lightly, and a moment later she was admitted to a well-lighted room that looked like a man's library; the footman disappeared and shut the door, and the latch made a noise as if the key were being turned; as she supposed such a thing to be out of the question, however, she was ashamed to go and try the lock.

She thought she was in the study of the master of the house and that some one would come for her at once, and she stood still in the middle of the room; setting down her bag on a chair, she pushed the hood back from her head carefully, as nuns do, in order not to discompose the rather complicated arrangement of the veil and head-band.

She had scarcely done this when, as she expected, a door at the end of the room was opened. But it was not a stranger that entered; to her unspeakable amazement, it was Giovanni Severi. In a flash she understood that by some trick she had been brought to his brother's dwelling. She was alone with him and the door was locked on the outside.

She laid one hand on the back of the nearest chair, to steady herself, wondering whether she were not really lying ill in her bed and dreaming in the delirium of a fever. But it was no dream; he was standing before

her, looking into her face, and his own was stern and dark as an Arab's. When he spoke at last, his voice was low and determined.

'Yes. You are in my house.'

Her tongue was loosed, with a cry of indignation.

'If you are not a madman, let me go!'

'I am not mad.'

His eyes terrified her, and she backed away from him towards the locked door. She almost shrieked for fear.

'If you have a spark of human feeling, let me out!'

'I am human,' he answered grimly, but he did not move to follow her.

'By whatever you hold sacred, let me go!' She was wrenching at the lock in despair with both hands, but sideways, while she kept her eyes on his.

'I hold you sacred — nothing else.'

'Sacred!' Her anger began to outbrave her terror now. 'Sacred, and you have trapped me by a vile trick!'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I admit that.'

He had not moved again and there was a window near her. She sprang to it and thrust the curtains aside, hoping to open the frame before he could stop her. But though she moved the fastenings easily, she could do no more, with all her strength, and Giovanni still stood motionless, watching her.

'You cannot open that window,' he said quietly. 'If you scream, no one will hear you. Do you think I would have brought you to a place where you could get help merely by crying out for it? The risk was too

great. I have made sure of being alone with you as long as I choose.'

The nun drew herself up against the red curtains.

'I did not know that you were a coward,' she said.

'I am what you have made me, brave, cowardly, desperate — anything you choose to call it! But such as I am, you must hear me to the end this time, for you have no choice.'

Sister Giovanna understood that there was no escape and she stood quite still; but he saw that her lips moved a little.

'God is not here,' he said, in a hard voice, for he knew that she was praying.

'God is here,' she answered, crossing her hands on her breast.

He came a step nearer and leaned on the back of a chair; he was evidently controlling himself, for his movements were studiedly deliberate, though his voice was beginning to shake ominously.

'If God is with you, Angela, then He shall hear that I love you and that you are mine, not His! He shall listen while I tell you that I will not give you up to be murdered by priests for His glory! Do what He will, He shall not have you. I defy Him!'

The nun shrank against the curtain, not from the man, but at the words.

'At least, do not blaspheme!'

'I must, if it is blasphemy to love you.'

'Yours is not love. Would to heaven it were, as I thought it was to-day. Love is gentle, generous, tender ——'

'Then be all three to me; for you love me, in spite of everything!'

'You have taught me to forget that I ever did,' she answered.

'Learn to remember that you did, to realise that you do, and forget only that I have used a trick to bring you here — a harmless trick, one carriage for another, my brother's orderly for a servant. I found out from Madame Bernard where you were going and I sent for you before the hour. You are as safe here as if you were praying in your chapel; in a few minutes the carriage will take you back, you will say you got into the wrong one by mistake, which is quite true, and the right one will take you where you are to go; you will be scarcely half-an-hour late and no one will ever know anything more about it.'

Sister Giovanna had listened patiently to his explanation, and believed what he said. He had always been impulsive to rashness, but now that her first surprise had subsided she was less afraid. He had evidently yielded to a strong temptation with the idea of forcing her to listen to him, and in reality, if she had understood herself, she was not able to believe that he would hurt her or bring any disgrace upon her.

'If you are in earnest,' she said, when he had finished, 'then let me go at once.'

'Presently,' he answered. 'This afternoon you made me promise to hear quietly what you had to say, and I did my best. I could not help your being frightened just now, I suppose — after all, I have carried you off

from the door of your Convent, and I meant you to understand that you were helpless, and must listen. I ought to have put it differently, but I am not clever at such things. All I ask is that you will hear me. After all, that is what you asked of me to-day.'

He had begun to walk up and down before her, while he was speaking; but he did not come near her, for the chair stood between her and the line along which he was pacing backwards and forwards. Something in his way of speaking reassured her, as he jerked out the rather disconnected sentences. Women often make the mistake of thinking that when we men begin to stumble away from the straight chalk-line of that logic in which we are supposed by them to take such pride, our purpose is wavering, whereas the opposite is often the case. Men capable of sudden, direct, and strong action are often poor talkers, particularly when they are just going to spring or strike. A little hesitation is more often the sign of a near outbreak than of any inward weakening. But Sister Giovanna was deceived.

'I shall be forced to listen, if you insist,' she said, moving half a step forward from the curtain, 'but how can I trust you, while I am your prisoner?'

'You can trust me, if you will be generous,' Giovanni answered.

'I do not know what you mean by the word,' replied the nun cautiously. 'If I am not generous, as you mean it, what then?'

Severi stopped in his walk; his face began to darken again, and his voice was rough and hard.

'What then? Why then, remember what I am and where you are!'

Sister Giovanna drew back again.

'I would rather trust in God than trust you when you speak in that tone,' she said.

He had used the very words she had spoken in the cloister when he had tried to take her by the arm, but they had a very different meaning now; his dangerous temper was rising again and he was threatening her. Yet her answer produced an effect she was far from expecting. He turned to the writing-table near him, opened one of the drawers and took out an army revolver. Sister Giovanna watched him. If he was only going to kill her she was not afraid.

'I will force you to trust me,' he said, quickly examining the charge as he came towards her.

'By threatening me with that thing?' she asked with contempt. 'You are mistaken!'

He was close to her, but he offered her the butt-end of the weapon.

'No,' he said, 'I am not mistaken. It is I who fear death, as long as you are alive, and here it is, in your hand.' But she would not take the revolver from him. 'You will not take it? Well, there it is.' He laid it on the chair, which he placed beside her. 'If I come too near you, or try to touch even your sleeve, you can use it. The law will acquit you, and even praise you for defending yourself in need.'

'There must be no need,' she answered, looking at him fixedly. 'Say quickly what you have to say.'

'Will you not sit down, then?'

'No, thank you. I would rather not.'

It would have seemed like consenting to be where she was; and besides, the revolver lay on the nearest available chair and she would not touch it, much less hold it in her hand, if she sat down to listen. Giovanni leaned back against the heavy table at some distance from her, resting his hands on the edge, on each side of him.

'After I left you to-day,' he began, 'I had a long talk with Monsignor Saracinesca in the street. I asked him questions about obtaining a dispensation for you. He made it look impossible, of course — that was to be expected! But I got one point from him, which is important. He made it quite clear to me that the request to be released from your vows must come from you, if it is to be considered at all. You understand that, do you not?'

'Is it possible that you yourself do not yet understand?' Sister Giovanna asked, as quietly as she could. 'Did I not tell you to-day that no power could loose me from my vows?'

'You were mistaken. There is a power that can, and that rests with the Pope, and he shall exercise it.'

'I will not ask for a dispensation. I have told you that it is an impossibility ——'

'There is no such thing as impossibility for men and women who love,' Giovanni answered. 'Have you forgotten the last words you said to me before I sailed for Africa?' He spoke gently now, and Sister Giovanna

turned her face from him. 'You said, "I will wait for you for ever." Do you remember?'

'Yes. I remember.'

'Did you "wait for ever," Angela?'

She looked at him again, and then came forward a little, drawn by an impulse she could not resist.

'Did I love another man, that you reproach me?' she asked. 'Such as my life has been, have I lived it as a woman lives who has forgotten? I know I have not. Yes, Giovanni, I have waited, but as one waits who hopes to meet in heaven the dear one who is dead on earth. Do you still find fault with me? Would you rather have had me go back to the world and to society after mourning you as long as a girl of nineteen could mourn for a man to whom she had not been openly engaged? Was I wrong? If you had really been dead and could have seen me, would you have wished that I were living differently?'

For a moment he was moved and held out one hand towards her, hoping that she would come nearer.

'No,' he answered — 'no, dear ——'

'But that was the only question,' she said earnestly, 'and you have answered it!'

She would not take his hand and Giovanni dropped his own with a gesture of disappointment.

'No,' he replied, in a colder tone, 'it is not the question, for you have not told me all the truth. If I had not been gone five years, if I had come back the day before you took the last vows, would you have taken them?'

'No, indeed!'

'If I had come the very next day after, would you not have done your best to be set free?'

There was an instant's pause before she spoke; then the answer came, clear and distinct.

'No.'

Severi turned from her with an impatient movement of his compact head, and tapped the carpeted floor with his heel. His answer broke from his lips harshly.

'You never loved me!'

She would have done wisely if she had been silent then; but she could not, for his words denied the truth that had ruled her life.

'Better than I knew,' she said. 'Better than I knew, even then.'

'Even then?' The words had hope in them. 'And now?' He was suddenly breathless.

'Yes, even now!' The tide of truth lifted her from her feet and swept her onward, helpless. 'Giovanni! Giovanni! Do you think it costs me nothing to keep my word with God?'

But he had been disappointed too often now, and he could not believe at once.

'It costs you less than it would to keep your faith with me,' he answered.

'It is not true! Indeed, it is not true!'

'Then let the truth win, dear! All the rest is fable!'

He was at her side now. She had tried to resist, but not long, and her hand was in his, though her face was turned away.

'No — no ——' she faltered, but he would not let her speak.

'All a fable of sorrow and a dream of parting, sweetheart! And now we have waked to meet again, your hand in my hand, my heart to your heart — your lips to mine ——'

She almost shrieked aloud in terror then and threw herself back bodily, as from the edge of a precipice. She might have fallen if he had not still held her hand, and as she recovered herself she tried to withdraw it. In her distress, words came that she regretted afterwards.

'Do you think that only you are human, of us two?' she cried, in passionate protest against passion itself, against him, against life, but still twisting her wrist in his grip and trying to wrench it away. 'For the love of heaven, Giovanni ——'

'No — for love of me ——'

She broke from him, for when he felt that he was hurting her his fingers relaxed. But she could not stay her own words.

'Yes, I love you,' she cried almost fiercely, as she stepped backwards. 'Right or wrong, I cannot unmake myself, and as for lying to you, I will not! God is my witness that I mean to love you living as I have loved you dead, without one thought of earth or one regret for what might have been! But, oh, may God forgive me, too, if I wish that we were side by side in one grave, at peace for ever!'

'Dead? Why? With life before us ——'

'No!' She interrupted him with rising energy. 'No, Giovanni, no! I was weak for a moment, but I am strong again. I can wait for you, and you will find strength to wait for me. You are so brave, Giovanni, you can be so generous, when you will! You will wait, too!'

'For what?'

'For the end that will be the beginning, for God's great To-morrow, when you will come to be with me for ever and ever, beyond the world, and all parting and all pain!'

There was a deep appeal to higher things in her words and in her voice, too, but it did not touch him; he only knew that at the very moment when she had seemed to be near yielding, the terrible conviction of her soul had come once more between him and her.

'There is no beyond,' he answered, chilled and sullen again. 'You live in a lying legend; your life is a fable and your sacrifice is a crime.'

The cruel words struck her tormented heart, as icy hailstones bruise the half-clad body of a starving child, out in the storm.

'You hurt me very much,' she said in a low voice.

'Forgive me!' he cried quickly. 'I did not mean to. I forget that you believe your dreams, for I cannot live in visions as you do. I only see a blind force, striking in the dark, a great injustice done to us both — a wrong I will undo, come what may!'

'You know my answer to that. You can undo nothing.'

'I am not answered yet. You say you love me — prove it!'

'Only my life can,' said the nun; 'only our two lives can prove our love, for we can live for each other still, perhaps we shall be allowed to die for each other, and in each other we shall find strength to resist ——'

'Not to resist love itself, Angela.'

'No, not to resist all that is good and true in love.'

'I cannot see what you see,' he answered. 'Nothing human is beyond my comprehension, good or bad, but you cannot make a monk of me, still less a saint — a Saint Louis of Gonzaga, who was too modest to look his own mother in the face!'

He laughed roughly, but checked himself at once, fearing to hurt her again.

She turned to him with a look of gentle authority.

'In spite of what you have done to-night,' she said, 'you are such a manly man, that you can be the man you will. Listen! If another woman tried to get your love, could you resist her? Would you, for love of me?'

'She would have small chance, you know that well enough.'

'There is another woman in me, Giovanni. Resist her!'

'I do not understand.'

'You must try! There is another woman in me, or what is left of her, and she is quite different from my real self. Resist her for my sake, as I am fighting her with all my strength. It was she who tempted you to bring me here by a trick you are ashamed of already;

it was she that made me weak, just now; but she is not the woman you love, she is not Angela, she is not worthy of you; and as for me, I hate her, with all my soul!'

Severi had said truly that he could not understand, and instead of responding to her appeal, he turned impatient again.

'You choose your words well enough,' he answered, 'but women's fine speeches persuade women, not men. No man was ever really moved to change his mind by a woman's eloquence, though we will risk our lives for a look of yours, for a touch — for a kiss!'

Sister Giovanna sighed and turned from him. The razor-edge of extremest peril was passed, for the words that left him cold and unbelieving had brought back conviction to her soul. She could live for him, pray for him, die for him, but she would not sin for him nor lift a hand to loose the vows that bound her to the religious life. Yet she did not see that she was slowly driving him to a state of temper in which he might break all barriers. Very good women rarely understand men well until it is too late, because men very rarely make any appeal to what is good in woman, whereas they lie in wait for all her weaknesses. It is almost a proverbial truth that men of the most lawless nature, if not actually of the worst character, are often loved by saintly women, perhaps because the true saint sees some good in every one and believes that those who have least of it are the ones who need help most. Sister Giovanna was not a saint yet, but she was winning her way as she gained ground in the struggle that had been forced upon her

that night, so cruelly against her will, and having got the better of a temptation, her charity made her think that Giovanni Severi was farther from it than he was. Outward danger was near at hand, just when inward peril was passed.

As if he were weary of the contest of words, he left the writing-table, sat down in a big chair farther away, and stared at the pattern in the carpet.

'You are forcing me to extremities,' he said, after a long pause, and rather slowly. 'Unless you consent to appeal to the Pope for your freedom, I will not let you leave this house. You are in my power here, and here you shall stay.'

She was more surprised and offended than indignant at what she took for an empty threat, and she was not at all frightened. Women never are, when one expects them to be. She drew her long cloak round her with simple dignity, crossed the room without haste, and stopped before the locked door, turning her head to speak to him.

'It is time for me to go,' she said gravely. 'Open the door at once, please.'

She could not believe that he would refuse to obey her, but he did not move; he did not even look up, as he answered:

'If I keep you a prisoner, there will be a search for you. You may stay here a day, a week, or a month, but in the end you will be found here, in my rooms.'

'And set free,' the nun answered, from the door, with some contempt.

'Not as you think. You will be expelled from your order for scandalous behaviour in having spent a night, or a week, or a month in an officer's lodging. What will you do then?'

'If such a thing were possible, I would tell the truth and I should be believed.' But her anger was already awake.

'The thing is very possible,' Giovanni answered, 'and no one will believe you. It will be out of the question for you to go back to your Convent, even for an hour. Even if the Mother Superior were willing, it could not be done. In the Middle Ages, you would have been sent to a prison for penitents for the rest of your life; nowadays you will simply be turned out of your order with public disgrace, the papers will be full of your story, your aunt will make Rome ring with it ——'

'What do you mean by all this?' cried the Sister, breaking out at last. 'Are you trying to frighten me?'

'No. I wish you to know that I will let nothing stand between you and me — nothing, absolutely nothing.' He repeated the word with cold energy. 'When it is known that you have been here for twenty-four hours, you will be forced to marry me. Nothing else can save you from infamy. Even Madame Bernard will not dare to give you shelter, for she will lose every pupil she has if it is found out that she is harbouring a nun who has broken her vows, a vulgar bad character who has been caught in an officer's lodgings! That is what they will call you!'

At first she had not believed that he was in earnest,

but she could not long mistake the tone of a man determined to risk much more than life and limb for his desperate purpose. Her just anger leaped up like a flame.

'Are you an utter scoundrel, after all? Have you no honour left? Is there nothing in you to which a woman can appeal? You talk of being human! You prate of your man's nature! And in the same breath you threaten an innocent girl with public infamy, if she will not disgrace herself of her own free will! Is that your love? Did I give you mine for that? Shame on you! And shame on me for being so deceived!'

Her voice rang like steel and the thrusts of her deadly reproach pierced deep. He was on his feet, in the impulse of self-defence, before she had half done, trying to silence her — he was at her side, calling her by her name, but she would not hear him.

'No, I believed in you!' she went on. 'I trusted you! I loved you — but I have loved a villain and believed a liar, and I am a prisoner under a coward's roof!' Beseeching, he tried to lay his hand upon her sleeve; she mistook his meaning. 'Take care!' she cried, and suddenly the revolver was in her hand. 'Take care, I say! A nun is only a woman after all!'

He threw himself in front of her in an instant, his arms wide out, and as the muzzle came close against his chest, he gave the familiar word of command in a loud, clear tone:

'Fire!'

Their eyes met, and they were both mad.

'If you despise me for loving you beyond honour and disgrace, then fire, for I would rather die by your hand than live without you! I am ready! Pull the trigger! Let the end be here, this instant!'

He believed that she would do it, and for one awful moment she had felt that she was going to kill him. Then she lowered the weapon and laid it on the chair beside her with slow deliberation, though her hands shook so much that she almost dropped it. As if no longer seeing him, she turned to the door, folded her hands on the panel, and leaned her forehead against them.

He heard her voice, low and trembling:

'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive them that trespass against us!'

His own hand was on the revolver to do what she had refused to do. As when the cyclone whirls on itself, just beyond the still storm-centre, and strikes all aback the vessel it has driven before it for hours, so the man's passion had turned to destroy him. But the holy words stayed his hand.

'Angela! Forgive me!' he cried in agony.

The nun heard him, raised her head and turned; his suffering was visible and appalling to see. But she found speech to soothe it.

'You did not know what you were saying.'

'I know what I said.'

He could hardly speak.

'You did not mean to say it, when you brought me here.' She was prompting him gently.

'No.' He almost whispered the one word, and then he regretted it. 'I hardly know what I meant to say,' he went on more firmly, 'but I know what I meant to accomplish. That is the truth, such as it is. I saw this afternoon that I should never persuade you to ask for your freedom unless I could talk to you alone where you must hear me; the chance came unexpectedly and I took it, for it would never have come again. I had no other place, I had not thought of what I should say, but I was ready to risk everything, all for all — as I have done ——'

'You have, indeed,' the nun said slowly, while he hesitated.

'And I have failed. Forgive me if you can. It was for love of you and for your sake.'

'For my sake, you should be true and brave and kind,' answered the Sister. 'But you ask forgiveness, and I forgive you, and I will try to forget, too. If I cannot do that, I can at least believe that you were mad, for no man in his senses would think of doing what you threatened! If you wish to live so that I may tell God in my prayers that I would have been your wife if I could, and that I hope to meet you in heaven — then, for my sake, be a man, and not a weakling willing to stoop to the most contemptible villainy to cheat a woman. Your brother was nearly killed in doing his duty here and you have taken his place. Make it your true calling, as I have made it mine to nurse the sick. At any moment, either of us may be called to face danger, till we die; we can feel that we are living the same life, for the same hope. Is that nothing?'

'The same life? A nun and a soldier?'

'Why not, if we risk it that others may be safe?'

'And in the same hope? Ah no, Angela! That is where it all breaks down!'

'No. You will live to believe it is there that all begins. Now let me go.'

Severi shook his head sadly; she was so unapproachably good, he thought — what chance had a mere man like himself of really understanding her splendid, saintly delusion?

Pica had turned the key on the outside and had taken it out, obeying his orders; but Giovanni had another like it in his pocket and now unlocked and opened the door. The nun went out, drawing her black hood quite over her head so that it concealed her face, and Giovanni followed her downstairs and held an umbrella over her while she got into the carriage, for it was still raining.

'Good-night,' he said, as Pica shut the door.

He did not hear her answer and the brougham drove away. When he could no longer see the lights, he went upstairs again, and after he had shut the door he stood a long time just where she had stood last. The revolver was still on the chair under the bright electric light. He fancied that the peculiar faint odour of her heavy cloth cloak, just damped by the few drops of rain that had reached it, still hung in the air. With the slightest effort of memory, her voice came back to his ears, now gentle, now gravely reproachful, but at last ringing like steel on steel in her generous anger. She had been present, in that room, in his power, during more than twenty

minutes, and now she was gone and would never come again.

He had done the most rash, inconsequent, and uselessly bad deed that had ever suggested itself to his imagination, and now that all was over he wondered how he could have been at once so foolish, so brutal, and so daring. Perhaps five years of slavery in Africa had unsettled his mind; he had heard of several similar cases and his own might be another; he had read of officers who had lost all sense of responsibility after months of fighting in the tropics, perhaps from having borne responsibility too long and unshared, who had come back, after doing brave and honourable work, to find themselves morally crippled for civilised life, and no longer able to distinguish right from wrong or truth from falsehood.

It had all happened quickly but illogically, as events follow each other in dreams, from the moment when he had gone to the Convent hospital with Monsignor Saracinesca till the brougham drove away in the dark, taking Angela back. He understood for the first time how men whom every one supposed to be of average uprightness could commit atrocious crimes; he shuddered to think what must have happened if a mere chance had not changed his mood, making him ask Angela's forgiveness and prompting him to let her go. She had touched him, that was all. If her voice had sounded only a little differently at the great moment, if her eyes had not looked at him with just that expression, if her attitude had been a shade less resolute, what

might not have happened? For the conviction that he could force her to be his wife if he chose to keep her a prisoner had taken possession of him suddenly, when all his arguments had failed. It had come with irresistible strength: the simplicity of the plan had been axiomatic, its immediate execution had been in his power, and while she was within the circle of his senses, his passion had been elemental and overwhelming. He tried to excuse himself with that; men in such cases had done worse things by far, and at least Angela had been safe from violence.

But his own words accused him; he had threatened her, he had talked of bringing infamy and public disgrace on the woman he loved, in order to force her to marry him; he had thought only of that end and not at all of the vile means; it all took shape now, and looked ugly enough. He felt the blood surging to his sunburnt forehead for shame, perhaps for the first time in his life, and the sensation was painfully humiliating.

It made a deep impression on him when he realised it. Often enough he had said that honour was his god, and he had taken pleasure in proving that he who makes the rule of honour the law of his life must of necessity be a good man, incapable of any falsehood or meanness or cruelty, and therefore truthful, generous, and kind; in other words, such an one must really be all that a good Christian aims at being. The religion of honour, Giovanni used to say, was of a higher nature than Christianity, since Christians might sin, repent, and be forgiven again and again, to the biblical seventy times seven

times; but a man who did one dishonourable deed in his whole life ceased to be a man of honour for ever. Having that certainty before his eyes, how could he ever be in danger of a fall?

But now he was ashamed, for he had fallen; he had forsaken his deity and his faith; the infamy he had threatened to bring on Angela had come back upon him and branded him. It was not because he had brought her to his lodging to talk with him alone, for he saw nothing dishonourable in that, since he felt sure that no harm could come to her in consequence. The dishonour lay in having thought of the rest afterwards, and in having been on the point of carrying out his threat. If he had kept her a prisoner only a few hours, the whole train of results would most probably have followed; if he had not let her go till the next day, they would have been inevitable and irretrievable. Nothing could have saved Sister Giovanna then.

As he saw the truth more and more clearly, shame turned into something more like horror, and as different from mere humiliation as remorse is from repentance. Thinking over what he had done, he attempted to put himself in Angela's place, and to see, or guess, how he would behave if some stronger being tried to force him to choose between public ignominy and breaking a solemn oath. Moreover, he endeavoured to imagine what the nun, as distinguished from the mere woman, must have felt when she found herself trapped in a man's rooms and locked in. Even his unbelief instinctively placed Sister Giovanna higher in the scale of goodness than

Angela Chiaromonte; he was an unbeliever, but not a scoffer, for somehow the rule of honour influenced him there, too. Nuns could really be saints, and were often holy women, and the fact that they were mistaken, in his opinion, only made their sacrifice more complete, since they were to receive no reward where they hoped for an eternal one; and he no longer doubted that Sister Giovanna was as truly good in every sense as any of them. What must she not have felt, less than an hour ago, when he had entered the room, telling her roughly that she was in his power, beyond all reach of help? Yet he had cherished the illusion that he was an honourable man, who would never take cruel advantage of any woman, still less of an innocent girl, far less, still, of a nursing nun, whose dress alone would have protected her from insult amongst any men but criminals.

In his self-contempt he hung his head as he sat alone by the table, half-fancying that if he raised his eyes he would see his own image accusing him. Sister Giovanna herself would have been surprised if she could have known how complete her victory had been. His god had forsaken him in his great need, and though he could not believe in hers, he was asking himself what inward strength that must be which could make a woman in extremest danger so gentle and yet so strong, so quick to righteous anger and yet so ready to forgive what he could never pardon in himself.

CHAPTER XVI

Sister Giovanna's nerves were good. The modern trained nurse is a machine, and a wonderfully good one on the whole; when she is exceptionally endowed for her work she is quite beyond praise. People who still fancy that Rome is a mediæval town, several centuries behind other great capitals in the application of useful discoveries and scientific systems, would be surprised if they knew the truth and could see what is done there, and not as an exception, but as the general rule. The common English and American belief, that Roman nuns nurse the sick chiefly by prayer and the precepts of the school of Salerno, is old-fashioned nonsense; the Pope's own authority requires that they should attend an extremely modern training-school where they receive a long course of instruction, probably as good as any in the world, from eminent surgeons and physicians.

One of the first results of proper training in anything is an increased steadiness of the nerves, which quite naturally brings with it the ability to bear a long strain better than ordinary persons can, and a certain habitual coolness that is like an armour against surprises of all kinds. One reason why Anglo-Saxons are generally cooler than people of other nations is that they are usually in better physical condition than other men.

A digression is always a liberty which the story-teller takes with his readers, and those of us have the fewest readers who make the most digressions; hence the little old-fashioned civility of apologising for them. The one I have just made seemed necessary to explain why Sister Giovanna was able to go to her patient directly from Severi's rooms, and to take up her work with as much quiet efficiency as if nothing unusual had happened.

She had found the portress in considerable perturbation, for the right carriage had just arrived, a quarter of an hour late instead of half-an-hour too soon. Sister Giovanna said that there had been a mistake, that she had been taken to the wrong house, that the first carriage should not have come to the hospital of the White Nuns at all, and that she had been kept waiting some time before being brought back. All this was strictly true, and without further words she drove away to the Villino Barini, the brougham Severi had hired having already disappeared. As he had foreseen, it was impossible that any one should suspect what had happened, for the nun was above suspicion, and when his carriage had once left the Convent door no one could ever trace the sham coachman and footman in order to question them. In that direction, therefore, there was nothing to fear. The authority of an Italian officer over his orderly is great, and his power of making the conscript's life singularly easy or perfectly unbearable is greater. Even Sister Giovanna knew that, and she felt no anxiety about the future.

Her mind was the more free to serve her conscience in examining her own conduct. It was not her right to analyse Giovanni's, however; he had made the circumstances in which she had been placed against her will, and the only question was, whether she had done right in a position she could neither have foreseen, so as to avoid it, nor have escaped from when once caught in it.

Examinations of conscience are tedious to every one except the subject of them, who generally finds them disagreeable, and sometimes positively painful. Sister Giovanna was honest with herself and was broad-minded enough to be fair; her memory had always been very good, she could recall nearly every word of the long interview, and she accused herself of having been weak twice, namely, when she had admitted that she was tempted, and when she had raised the revolver and Giovanni had thrown himself against it. The danger had been great at that moment, she knew, for she had felt that her mind was losing its balance. But she had not wished to kill him, even for a moment, though a terrifying conviction that her finger was going to pull the trigger in spite of her had taken away her breath. Looking back, she thought it must have been the sensation some people have at the edge of a precipice, when they feel an insane impulse to jump off, without having the slightest wish to destroy themselves. If a man affected in this way should lose his head and leap to destruction, his act would assuredly not be suicide. The nun knew it very well, and she was equally sure that if she had been startled into pulling the trigger, and had

killed the man she had loved so well, it would not have been homicide, whatever the law might have called it. But the consequences would have been frightful, and the danger had been real. She could be thankful for her good nerves, since nothing had happened, that was all. Where she had done wrong had been in taking up the weapon, great as the provocation to self-defence had been.

Morally speaking, and apart from the possible fatal result, her main fault lay in having confessed to Giovanni that she was really tempted to ask release from her vows. Now that he was not near, no such temptation assailed her, but there had been a time when to resist it had seemed the greatest sacrifice that any human being could make. She could only draw one conclusion from this fact, but it was a grave one: in spite of her past life, her vows and her heartfelt faith, she was not free from material and earthly passion. Innocence is one thing, ignorance is another, and a trained nurse of twenty-five cannot and should not be as ignorant as a child, whether she be a nun or a lay woman. Sister Giovanna knew what she had felt: it had been the thrill of an awakened sense, not the vibration of a heartfelt sympathy; it belonged neither to the immortal spirit nor to the kingdom of the mind, but to the dying body. Temptation is not sin, but it is wrong to expose oneself to it willingly, except for a purpose so high as to justify the risk. Sister Giovanna quietly resolved that she would never see Severi again, and she judged that the surest way of abiding by her resolution was to join the mission to the

Far East and leave Italy for ever. Having already thought of taking the step merely in order to get away from the possibility of hating a person who had wronged her and robbed her, it seemed indeed her duty to take it now for this much stronger reason. Since she could still be weak, her first and greatest duty was to put herself beyond the reach of weakening influences. Giovanni would not leave Rome while she stayed there, that was certain; there was no alternative but to go away herself, for a man capable of such a daring and lawless deed as carrying her off from the door of the Convent, under the very eyes of the portress, might do anything. Indeed, he might even follow her to Rangoon; but she must risk that, or bury herself in a cloister, which she would not do if she could help it.

While she was nursing the new case to which she had been called, her resolution became irrevocable. When the patient finally recovered she returned to the Convent, and it was not till she had been doing ordinary work in the hospital during several days that she asked to see the Mother Superior alone. Captain Ugo Severi had gone to the baths of Montecatini to complete his cure, nothing more had been heard of Giovanni, and the Mother was inclined to believe that his meeting with Sister Giovanna had been final, and that he would make no further attempt to see her. But the nun herself thought otherwise.

She sat where she always did when she came to the Mother Superior's room, on a straight-backed chair between the corner of the table and the wall, and she

told her story without once faltering or hesitating, though without once looking up, from the moment when she had got into the wrong carriage till she had at last reached the Villino Barini in safety. Though it was late in the afternoon and the light was failing, the Mother shaded her eyes with one hand while she listened.

There was neither rule nor tradition under which Sister Giovanna could have felt it her duty to tell her superior what had happened, and she had necessarily been the only judge of what her confessor should know of the matter. Even now, if she had burst into floods of tears or shown any other signs of being on the verge of a nervous crisis, the elder woman would probably have stopped her and told her not to make confidences that concerned another person until she was calmer. But she evidently had full control of her words and outward bearing, and the Mother listened in silence. Then the young nun expounded the conclusion to which she believed herself forced: she must leave a country in which Giovanni might at any moment make another meeting inevitable, and the safest refuge was the Rangoon Leper Asylum. She formally asked permission to be allowed to join the mission.

The Mother Superior's nervous little hand contracted spasmodically upon her eyes, and then joined its fellow on her knee. She sat quite still for a few seconds, looking towards the window; the evening glow was beginning to fill the garden and the cloisters with purple and gold, and a faint reflection came up to her suffering face.

'It kills me to let you go,' she said at last, just above a whisper.

The words and the tone took Sister Giovanna by surprise, though she had lately understood that the Mother Superior's affection for her was much stronger than she would formerly have believed possible; it was something more than the sincere friendship which a middle-aged woman might feel for one much younger, and it was certainly not founded on the fact that the latter was an exceptionally gifted nurse, whose presence and activity were of the highest importance to the hospital. Neither friendship nor admiration for a fellow-worker could explain an emotion of such tragic depth and strength that it seemed almost too human in a woman otherwise quite above and beyond ordinary humanity. Sister Giovanna could find nothing to say, and waited in silence.

'I did not know that one could feel such pain,' said Mother Veronica, looking steadily out of the window; but her voice was little more than a breath.

The Sister could not understand, but in the midst of her own great trouble, the sight of a suffering as great as her own, and borne on account of her, moved her deeply.

All at once the Mother Superior swayed to one side on her chair, as if she were fainting, and she might have fallen if the nun had not darted forward to hold her upright; but at the touch, she straightened herself with an effort and gently pushed the young Sister away from her.

'If it is for me that you are in such pain, Mother,'

said Sister Giovanna gently, 'I cannot thank you enough for being so sorry! But I do not deserve that you should care so much — indeed, I do not!'

'If I could give my life for yours, it would still be too little!'

'You are giving your life for many,' Sister Giovanna answered gently. 'That is better.'

''No. It is not better, but it is the best I can do. You do not understand.'

'How can I? But I am grateful ——'

'You owe me nothing,' the Mother Superior answered with sudden energy, 'but I owe you everything. You have given me the happiest hours of my life. But it was too much. God sent you to me, and God is taking you away from me — God's will be done!'

Sister Giovanna felt that she was near something very strange and great which she might not be able to comprehend if it were shown clearly, and which almost frightened her by its mysterious veiled presence. The evening light penetrated Mother Veronica's translucid features, as if they were carved out of alabaster, and the hues that lingered in them might have been reflected from heaven; her upturned eyes, that sometimes looked so small and piercing, were wide and sorrowful now. The young Sister saw, but guessed nothing of the truth.

'The happiest hours in your life!' She repeated the words with wonder.

'Yes,' said the elder woman slowly, 'the happiest by far! Since you have been here, you have never given me one bad moment, by word or deed, excepting by the

pain you yourself have had to bear. If you go away, and if I should not live long, remember what I have told you, for if you have some affection for me, it will comfort you to think that you have made me very, very happy for five long years.'

'I am glad, though I have done nothing but my duty, and barely that. I cannot see how I deserve such praise, but if I have satisfied you, I am most glad. You have been a mother to me.'

Slowly the transfigured face turned to her at last, full of radiance.

'Do you mean it just as you say it, my dear?'

'Indeed, indeed, I do!' Sister Giovanna answered, wondering more and more, but in true earnest.

The dark eyes gazed on her steadily for a long time, with an expression she had never seen in human eyes before. Then the truth came, soft and low.

'I am your mother.'

'You are a mother to us all,' the young Sister answered.

'I am your mother, dear, your own mother that bore you — you, my only child. Do you understand?'

Sister Giovanna's eyes opened wide in amazement, but there was a forelightening of joy in her face.

'You?' she cried. 'But I knew my mother — my father ——'

'No. She whom you called your mother was my elder sister. I ran away with the man I loved, because he was a Protestant and poor, and my parents would not allow the marriage. We were married in his Church, but my family would have nothing more to do with me.

I was an outcast for them, disgraced, never to be mentioned. Your own father died of typhoid fever a few days before you were born. I was ill a long time, ill and poor, almost starving. I wrote to my sister, imploring help. She and her husband bargained with me. They agreed to make a long journey and bring you back as their child. They promised that you should be splendidly provided for; you would be an heiress, all that my brother-in-law could legally dispose of should go to you; but I was to disappear for ever and never let the truth be known. What could I do? You were two months old and I was penniless. I let them take you, and I became a nursing sister. It was like tearing off a limb, but I let you go to the glorious future that was before you. At least, you would have all the world held, to make up for my love, and I knew they would be kind to you. They were ashamed of me, that was all. They said that I was not married! You know how rigid they were, with their traditions and prejudices! That is my story. I have kept my word, and their secret, until to-day.'

Sister Giovanna listened with wide eyes and parted lips, for the world she had lived in during more than five-and-twenty years was wrenched from its path and sent whirling into space at a tangent she could not follow; there was nothing firm under her feet, she had nothing substantial left, not even the name she had once called her own. It had all been unreal. The dead Knight of Malta lying in state in the great palace had not been her father; the delicate woman with the ascetic

face, who had died when she had been a little child, had not been her mother; they had never registered her birth at the Municipality because she had not been their child and had not even been born in Rome; they had not taken the proper legal steps to adopt her and make her their heir, because they had been ashamed of her own mother. And her own mother was before her, Mother Veronica, the Superior of the Convent in which she had taken refuge because they had left her a destitute, nameless, penniless waif, after promising to make her their daughter in the eyes of the law. She knew that without a certificate of birth a girl could not easily be legally married in Italy; if the Prince had lived and she had been about to marry, what would he have done about that? But he was gone, and she would not ask herself such a question, for the answer seemed to be that he would have done something dishonest rather than admit the truth. A deep resentment sprang up in her against the dead man and woman who had not honourably kept their solemn promise to her mother, and her aunt's lawless act and hatred of her sank into insignificance beside their sin of omission. If the Princess's confession during her illness had not been altogether the invention of a fevered brain, and if there had really been a will, it had been worthless, and its destruction had not robbed Angela of a farthing. She and her mother had been cheated and their lives made desolate by those other two; she must not think of it, lest she should hate the dead, as she had dreaded to hate the living.

All this had flashed upon her mind in one of those quick visions of the truth by which we sometimes become aware of many closely connected facts simultaneously, without taking account of each. After the Mother Superior had ceased speaking the silence lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed long to her now that she had told her secret and was waiting to be answered. Would her daughter forgive her? The young nun's face expressed nothing she felt at that moment; for the staring eyes and parted lips remained mechanically fixed in a look of blind surprise long after her thoughts were on the wing; and her thoughts flew far, but their wide-circling flight brought them back, like swallows, as swiftly as they had flown away.

Then her heart spoke, and in another moment she was at her mother's knee, like a child, with a little natural cry that had never passed her lips before. For a breathing-space both guessed what heaven might hold of rest, refreshment, and peace, and the march of tragic fate was stayed while mother and daughter communed together, and dreamed of never parting on earth but to meet in heaven, of keeping their sweet secret from all the world as something sacred for themselves, of working side by side, in one life, one love, one faith, one hope, of facing all earthly trouble together, and of fighting every battle of the spirit hand in hand.

Two could bear what one could not. Sister Giovanna felt that fresh strength was given her, and the long-tried elder woman was conscious that her will to do good was renewed and doubled and trebled, so that it could

accomplish twice and three times as much as before. Her daughter would not leave her now to be a martyr in the East, as she might escape from herself and from the man who loved her no longer. Why should she go? If she still felt that she must leave Rome for a time, she could go to me if the sister's house far away, but not to the East, the deadly East! Heaven did not love useless suffering: the Church condemned all self-sacrifice that was not meet, right, and reasonable. In due time she would come back, when all danger was over, when Giovanni had lived through the first days of surprise, disappointment, and passion.

The sunset glow had faded and twilight was coming on when the two went down the steps and crossed the cloistered garden to the chapel, for it was the hour for Vespers. They walked as usual, with an even, noiseless tread, the young nun on the left of her superior and keeping step with her, but not quite close to her, for that would not have been respectful; yet each felt as if the other's hand were in hers and their hearts were beating gently with the same loving thought. Peace had come upon them and they felt that it would be lasting.

At the chapel door they separated: the Mother Superior passed to her high-backed, carved seat at the end, the three aged nuns who had survived from other times sat next to her in the order of their years, and Sister Giovanna took her appointed place much farther down. A number of seats were empty, belonging to those nurses who were attending private cases.

Cloistered nuns spend many hours of the day and

night in chapel, but the working orders use short offices and have much latitude as to the hours at which their services are held. Except on Sundays and at daily mass, no priest officiates; the Mother Superior or Mother Prioress leads with her side of the choir, the Sub-Prioress, or the Mistress of the Novices, or whoever is second in authority, responds with the other nuns. The Office of Saint Dominic for Vespers practically consists of one short Psalm, a very diminutive Lesson, one Hymn, and the beautiful Canticle 'My soul doth magnify the Lord'; then follows a little prayer and the short responsory, and all is over. The whole service does not last ten minutes.

The women's voices answered each other peacefully, and then rose together in the quaint old melody of the hymn, the sweet notes of the younger ones carried high on the stronger tones of the elder Sisters, while the three old nuns droned on in a sort of patient, nasal, half-mannish counter-tenor, scarcely pronouncing the words they sang, but making an accompaniment that was not wholly unpleasing.

Two versicles of responsory next, and then the Mother Superior began to intone the Magnificat, and Sister Giovanna took up the grand plain-chant with the others. In spite of her deep trouble, the words had never meant to her what they meant now, and she felt her world lifted up from earth to the gates of Peace.

But she was not to reach the end of the wonderful song that day.

'And His mercy is on them that fear Him, from generation to generation,' the nuns sang.

With a crash, as if a thunderbolt had fallen at their feet in the choir, the Great Unforeseen once more flashed from its hiding-place and hurled itself into their midst.

The chapel rocked to and fro twice with a horrible noise of loosened masonry grinding on itself, and the panes of the high windows fell in three separate showers and were smashed to thousands of splinters on the stone floor, the lights went out, the sacred ornaments on the altar toppled and fell upon each other, the twilight that glimmered through the broken windows alone overcame the darkness in the wrecked church. The destruction was sudden, violent, and quick. In less than fifteen seconds after the shock, perfect stillness reigned again.

The Sisters, in their first terror, caught at each other instinctively, or grasped the woodwork with convulsed hands. One or two novices had screamed outright, but the most of them uttered an ejaculatory prayer, more than half unconscious. The Mother Superior was standing upright and motionless in her place.

'Is any one hurt?' she asked steadily, and looking round the semicircle in the gloom.

No answer came to her question.

'If any one of you was struck by anything,' she said again, 'let her speak.'

No one had been hurt, for the small choir was under the apse of the chapel and there were no windows there.

'Let us go to the hospital at once,' she said. 'The patients will need us.'

Her calm imposed itself upon the young novices and one or two of the more nervous Sisters; the others were brave women and had only been badly startled and shaken, for which no one could blame them. They filed out, two and two, by the side door of the choir, Mother Veronica coming last. From the cloister they could see that the big glass door of the reception-hall was smashed, and that the windows overhead on that side were also broken. Singularly enough, not one of those on the other side was injured.

All had felt the certainty that a dynamite bomb had been exploded somewhere in the building with the intention of blowing up the hospital. As they fell out of their ranks and scattered in twos and threes, hastening to the different parts of the establishment where each did her accustomed work, Sister Giovanna naturally found herself beside the Mother Superior. As one of the supervising nurses, she was, of course, needed in the hospital itself with her superior.

'What do you think it was, Mother?' she asked in a low tone.

'Nothing but dynamite could have done such damage ——'

She was still speaking, when a lay sister rushed out of the door they were about to enter, with a broom in her hand, which she had evidently forgotten to put down.

'The powder magazine at Monteverde!' she cried excitedly. 'I saw it from the window! It was like fireworks! It has blown up with everybody in it, I am sure!'

CHAPTER XVII

THE lay sister was right. The great powder magazine at Monteverde had been blown up, but by what hands no one has ever surely known. The destruction was sudden, complete, tremendous, for a large quantity of dynamite had been stored in the deep vaults. To-day, a great hollow in the side of the hill and near the road marks the spot where the buildings stood. Many stories have been told of the catastrophe; many tales have been repeated about suspicious characters who had been seen in the neighbourhood before the fatal event, and for some of these there is fairly good authority.

All those who were in the city when the explosion took place, and I myself was in Rome at the time, will remember how every one was at first convinced that his own house had been struck by lightning or suddenly shaken to its foundations. Every one will remember, too, the long and ringing shower of broken glass that followed instantly upon the terrific report. Every window looking westward was broken at once, except some few on the lower stories of houses protected by buildings opposite.

Giovanni Severi was in the main building over the vaults a short time before the catastrophe, having just finished a special inspection which had occupied most

of the afternoon. He was moving to leave the place when an unfamiliar sound caught his ears, a noise muffled yet sharp, like that of the discharge of musketry heard through a thick wall. The junior officers and the corporal who were with him heard it, too, but did not understand its meaning. Giovanni, however, instantly remembered the story told by one of the survivors from a terrible explosion of ammunition near Naples many years previously. That muffled sound of quick firing came from metallic cartridges exploding within the cases that held them; each case would burst and set fire to others beside it; like the spark that runs along a fuse, the train of boxes would blow up in quick succession till the large stores of gunpowder were fired and then a mass of dynamite beyond. There were divisions in the vaults, there were doors, there were walls, but Giovanni well knew that no such barriers would avail for more than a few minutes.

Without raising his voice, he led his companions to the open door, speaking as he went.

'The magazine will blow up in two or three minutes at the outside,' he said. 'Send the men running in all directions, and go yourselves, to warn the people in the cottages near by to get out of doors at once. It will be like an earthquake; every house within five hundred yards will be shaken down. Now run! Run for your lives and to save the lives of others! Call out the men as you pass the gates.'

The three darted away across the open space that lay between the central building and the guard-house.

Giovanni ran, too, but not away from the danger. There were sentries stationed at intervals all round the outer wall, as round the walls of a prison, and they would have little chance of life if they remained at their posts. Giovanni ran like a deer, but even so he lost many seconds in giving his orders to each sentinel, to run straight for the open fields to the nearest cottages and to give warning. The astonished sentinels obeyed instantly, and Giovanni ran on. He reached the very last just too late; at that moment the thunder of the explosion rent the air. He felt the earth rock and was thrown violently to the ground; then something struck his right arm and shoulder, pinning him down; he closed his eyes and was beyond hearing or feeling.

Within three-quarters of an hour the road to Monteverde was thronged with vehicles of all sorts and with crowds of people on foot. The nature of the disaster had been understood at once by the soldiery, and the explanation had spread among the people, rousing that strange mixture of curiosity and horror that draws the common throng to the scene of every accident or crime. But amongst the very first the King was on the spot with half-a-dozen superior officers, and in the briefest possible time the search for dead and wounded began. The story of Giovanni's splendid presence of mind and heroic courage ran from mouth to mouth. The junior officers and the men whom he had sent in all directions came in and reported themselves to the officer who had taken charge of everything for the time being. Only one man was missing — only one man and Gio-

vanni himself. A few casualties amongst the peasants were reported, but not a life had been lost and hardly a bone was broken. Yet Giovanni was missing.

With the confidence of men who understood that the magazine must have been so entirely destroyed at once as to annihilate all further danger in an instant, the searchers went up to the ruin of the outer wall and peered into the great dusty pit out of which the foundations of the magazine had been hurled hundreds of feet into the air. Something of the outline of the enclosure could still be traced, and the sentinels whom Giovanni had warned from their post had already told their story. They found, too, that the missing man himself had been one of the sentries, and the inference was clear: their commanding officer had been killed before he had reached the last post.

For a long time they searched in vain. Great masses of masonry had shot through the outer wall and had rolled on or been stopped by the inequalities of the ground. Most of the wall itself was fallen and its direction could only be traced by a heap of ruins. Twilight had turned to darkness, and the search grew more and more difficult as a fine rain began to fall. Below, the multitude was already ebbing back to Rome; it was dark, it was wet, hardly any one had been hurt, and there was nothing to see: the best thing to be done was to go home.

It was late when a squad of four artillerymen heard a low moan that came from under a heap of stones close by them. In an instant they were at work with

the pickaxes and spades they had borrowed from the peasants' houses, foreseeing what their work would be. From time to time they paused a moment and listened. Before long they recognised their comrade's voice.

'Easy, brothers! Don't crack my skull with your pickaxes, for Heaven's sake!'

'Is the Captain there?' asked one of the men.

'Dead,' answered the prisoner. 'He was warning me when we were knocked down together. Make haste, but for goodness' sake be careful!'

They were trained men and they did their work quickly and well. What had happened was this. The heavy and irregular mass of masonry that had pinned Giovanni to the ground by his arm had helped to make a sort of shelter, across which a piece of the outer wall had fallen without breaking, followed by a mass of rubbish. By what seemed almost a miracle to the soldiers, their companion was entirely unhurt, and no part of the officer's body had been touched except the arm that lay crushed beneath the stones.

They cleared away the rubbish and looked at him as he lay on his back pale and motionless under the light of their lanterns. They knew what he had done now; they understood that of them all he was the hero. One of the men took off his cap reverently, and immediately the others followed his example, and so they all stood for a few moments looking at him in silence and in deference to his brave deeds. Then they set to work in silence to move the heavy block of broken masonry that had felled him, and their com-

rade helped them too, though he was stiff and bruised and dazed from the terrific shock. As the mass yielded at last before their strength and rolled away, one of the men uttered a cry.

'He is alive!' he exclaimed. 'He moved his head!'

Before he had finished speaking the man was on his knees beside Giovanni, tearing open his tunic and his shirt to listen for the beating of his heart. It was faint but audible. Giovanni Severi was not dead yet, and a few moments later his artillerymen were carrying him down the hill towards the road, his injured arm swinging like a rag at his side.

They did not wait for orders; there were a number of carriages still in the road and the men had no idea where their superiors might be. Their first thought was to get Giovanni conveyed to a hospital as soon as possible.

'We must take him to the White Sisters,' said the eldest of them. 'That is where his brother was so long.'

The others assented readily enough; and finding an empty cab in the road, they lifted the wounded officer into it and pulled up the hood against the rain, whilst two of them crept in under it, telling the cabman where to go.

In less than a quarter of an hour the cab stopped before the hospital of the White Sisters, and when the portress opened the door, the two artillerymen explained what had happened and begged that their officer might be taken in at once; and, moreover, that the portress would kindly get some money with which

to pay the cabman, as they could only raise seven sous between them.

The Mother Superior had supposed that there would be many wounded, and had directed that the orderlies should be ready at the door with stretchers, although the Convent hospital did not receive accident cases or casualties except in circumstances of extreme emergency. The hospital of the Consolazione, close to the Roman Forum, was the proper place for these, but it was very much farther, and the White Sisters were so well known in all Trastevere that they were sometimes called upon, even in the middle of the night, to take in a wounded man who could not have lived to reach the great hospital beyond the Tiber.

Under the brilliant electric light in the main hall, the Mother Superior recognised Giovanni's unconscious face; his crushed arm, hanging down like a doll's, and his torn and soiled uniform, told the rest. He was taken at once to the room his brother had occupied so long. The Mother Superior herself helped the surgeon and another Sister to do all that could be done then. Sister Giovanna knew nothing of his coming, for she was in the wards, where there was much to be done. The patients who had fever had been severely affected by the terrible explosion, and most of them were more or less delirious and had to be quieted. In the windows that look westward every pane of glass was broken, though the outer shutters had been closed at sunset, a few minutes before the catastrophe. There were heaps of broken glass to be cleared away, and the patients

whose beds were now exposed to draughts were moved. Sister Giovanna, who was not the supervising nurse for the week, worked quietly and efficiently with the others, carrying out all directions as they were given; but her heart misgave her, and when one of the nuns came in and said in a low voice that an officer from Monteverde had been brought in with his arm badly crushed, she steadied herself a moment by the foot of an iron bedstead. In the shaded light of the ward no one noticed her agonised face.

Presently she was able to ask where the officer was, and the Sister who had brought the news announced that he was in Number Two. It was Giovanni now, and not his brother, the unhappy woman was sure of that, and every instinct in her nature bade her go to him at once. But the unconscious volition of those long trained to duty is stronger than almost any impulse except that of downright fear, and Sister Giovanna stayed where she was, for there was still much to be done.

About half-an-hour later the Mother Superior entered the ward and found her and led her quietly out. When they were alone together, the elder woman told her the truth.

'Giovanni Severi has been brought here from Monteverde,' she said. 'His right arm is so badly crushed that unless it is amputated he will certainly die.'

Sister Giovanna did not start, for she had guessed that he had received some terrible injury. She answered quietly enough, by a question.

'Is he conscious?' she asked. 'I believe that, by the law, his consent must be obtained before the operation.'

'He came to himself, but the doctor thought it best to give him a hypodermic of morphia and he is asleep.'

'Did he speak, while he was conscious?'

The Mother Superior knew what was passing in her daughter's mind, and looked quietly into the expectant eyes.

'He did not pronounce your name, but he said that he would rather die outright than lose his right arm. In any case, it would not be possible to amputate it during the night. He had probably dined before the accident, and it will not be safe to put him under ether before to-morrow morning.'

Sister Giovanna did not speak for a few moments, though the Mother Superior was almost quite sure what her next words would be, and that the young nun was mentally weighing her own strength of character with the circumstances that might arise.

'May I take care of him to-night?' she asked at last rather suddenly, like a person who has decided to run a grave risk.

'Can you be sure of yourself?' asked the elder woman, trying to put the question in the authoritative tone which she would have used with any other Sister in the community.

But it was of no use; when she thought of all it meant, and of what the delicate girl was to her, all the coldness went out of her voice and the deepest motherly

sympathy took its place. The answer came after a short pause in which the question was finally decided.

'Yes. I can be sure of myself now.'

'Then come with me,' answered the Mother Superior.

They followed the passage to the lift, were taken up to the third floor, and a few moments later were standing before the closed door of Number Two. The Mother Superior paused with her hand on the door knob. She looked silently at her young companion, as if repeating the question she had already asked; and Sister Giovanna understood and slowly bent her head.

'I can bear anything now,' she said.

She opened the door, and the two entered the quiet room, where one of the Sisters sat reading her breviary by the shaded light in the corner. The wounded man lay fast asleep under the influence of the morphia, and the white coverlet was drawn up to his chin. He was not very pale, Sister Giovanna thought; but she could not see well, because there was a green shade over the small electric lamp in the corner of the room.

'Sister Giovanna will take your place for to-night,' said the Mother Superior to the nun, who had risen respectfully, and who left the room at once.

The mother and daughter turned to the bedside and stood looking down at the sleeping man's face. Instinctively their hands touched and then held each other. Experience told them both that in all probability Giovanni would sleep till morning under the drug, and would wake in a dreamy state in which he might not recognise his nurse at once; but sooner or

later the recognition must take place, words must be spoken, and a question must be asked. Would he or would he not consent to the operation which alone could save his life? So far as the two women knew and understood the law, everything depended on that. If he deliberately refused, it would be because he chose not to live without Angela, not because he feared to go through life a cripple. They were both sure of that, and they were sure also that if any one could persuade him to choose life where the choice lay in his own hands, it would be Sister Giovanna herself. The operation was not one which should be attended with great danger; yet so far as the law provided it was of such gravity as to require the patient's own consent.

Neither of the two nuns spoke again till the Mother Superior was at the door to go out.

'If you want me, ring for the lay sister on duty and send for me,' she said. 'I will come at once.'

She did not remember that she had ever before said as much to a nurse whose night was beginning.

'Thank you,' answered Sister Giovanna; 'I think he will sleep till morning.'

The door closed and she made two steps forward till she stood at the foot of the bed. For a few moments she gazed intently at the face she knew so well, but then her glance turned quickly toward the corner where the other nurse had sat beside the shaded lamp. That should be her place, too, but she could not bear to be so far from him. Noiselessly she brought a chair to the bedside and sat down so that she could look at

his face. Since she had been in the room she had felt something new and unexpected — the deep, womanly joy of being alone to take care of the beloved one in the hour of his greatest need. She would not have thought it possible that a ray of light could penetrate her darkness, or that in her deep distress anything approaching in the most distant degree to a sensation of peace and happiness could come near her. Yet it was there and she knew it, and her heart rested. It was an illusion, no doubt, a false dawn such as men see in the tropics, only to be followed by a darker night; but while it lasted it was the dawn for all that. It was a faint, sweet breath of happiness, and every instinct of her heart told her that it was innocent. She would have been contented to watch over him thus, in his sleep, for ever, seeing that he too was momentarily beyond suffering.

It seemed, indeed, as if it might be long before any change came; his breathing was a little heavy, but was regular as that of a sleeping animal; his colour was even and not very pale; his eyes were quite shut and the eyelids did not quiver nor twitch. The tremendous drug had brought perfect calm and rest after a shock that would have temporarily shattered the nerves of the strongest man. Then, too, there was nothing to be seen and there was nothing in the room to suggest the terrible injury that was hidden under the white coverlet — nothing but the lingering odour of iodoform, to which the nun was so well used that she never noticed it.

Hour after hour she sat motionless on the chair, her eyes scarcely ever turning from his face. He was so quiet that there was absolutely nothing to be done; to smooth his pillow or to pass a gentle hand over his forehead would have been to risk disturbing his perfect quiet, and she felt not the slightest desire to do either. For a blessed space she was able to put away the thought of the question which would be asked when he wakened, and which he only could answer. It was not a night of weary waiting nor of anxious watching; while its length lasted, he was hers to watch, hers alone to take care of, and that was so like happiness that the hours ran on too swiftly and she was startled when she heard the clock of the San Michele hospice strike three; she remembered that it had struck nine a few minutes after she had sat down beside him.

Her anxiety awoke again now, and that delicious state of peace in which she had passed the night began to seem like a past dream. In a little more than an hour the dawn would begin to steal through the outer blinds — the dawn she had watched for and longed for a thousand times in five years of nursing. It would be unwelcome now; it would mean the day, and the day could only mean for her the inevitable question.

She sat down again to watch him, for she had risen nervously in the first moment of returning distress; and she felt the cold of the early morning stealing upon her as she became gradually sure that his breathing was softer, and that from time to time a very slight quivering of the closed lids proclaimed the gradual return of

consciousness. He would not wake in pain, or at least not in any acute suffering; she knew that by experience, for in such cases the nerves near the injured part generally remained paralysed for a long time. But he would wake sleepily at first, wondering where he was, glancing vaguely from one wall to another, from the foot of the bed or the window to her own face, without recognising it or understanding anything. That first stage might last a few minutes, or half-an-hour; he might even fall asleep again and not wake till much later. But sooner or later recognition would come, and with it a shock to him, a sudden tension of the mind and nerves, under which he might attempt to move suddenly in his bed, and that might be harmful, though she could not tell how. She wondered whether it would not be her duty to leave him before that moment. It was true that he would recognise the room in which he had so often spent long hours with his brother; he would know, as soon as he was conscious, that he was in the Convent hospital and under the same roof with her; then he would ask for her. Perhaps the surgeon would think it better that he should see her, but she would not be left alone with him; possibly she might be asked by the Mother Superior or by Monsignor Saracinesca, if he chanced to come that morning, to use her influence with Giovanni in order that he might submit to what alone could save him from death. It was going to be one of the hardest days in all her life — would God not stay the dawn one hour?

It was stealing through the shutters now, grey and soft, and the wounded man's sleep was unmistakably lighter. Sister Giovanna drew back noiselessly from the bedside and carried her chair to the corner where the little table stood, and sat down to wait again. It might be bad for him to wake and see some one quite near him, looking into his face.

At that moment the door opened quietly and the Mother Superior stood on the threshold, looking preternaturally white, even for her. Sister Giovanna rose at once and went to meet her. They exchanged a few words in a scarcely audible whisper. The Mother had come in person to take the nun's place for a while, judging that it would not be well if Giovanni wakened and found himself alone with her.

The Sister went to her cell, where she had not been since the explosion on the previous evening. The brick floor was strewn with broken glass and was damp with the fine rain, driven through the lattice by the south-west wind during the night. Even the rush-bottomed chair was all wet, and the edge of the white counterpane on the little bed. It was all very desolate.

CHAPTER XVIII

GIOVANNI opened his eyes at last, looked at the ceiling for a few moments, and then closed them again. Plain white ceilings are very much alike, and for all he could see as he looked up he was at home in his own bed, at dawn, and there was plenty of time for another nap. He felt unaccountably heavy, too, though not exactly sleepy, and it would be pleasant to feel himself going off into unconsciousness again for a while, knowing that there was no hurry.

But his eyes had not been shut long before he became aware that he was in a strange place. He could not sleep again because an unfamiliar odour of iodoform irritated his nostrils; he missed something, too, either some noise outside to which he was used or some step near him. In the little house at Monteverde he could always hear his orderly cleaning the stable early in the morning; he grew suddenly uneasy and tried to turn in his bed, and instead of the noise of broom and bucket and sousing, he heard the indescribably soft sound of felt shoes on tiles as the Mother Superior came to his side.

Then, in a flash, he remembered everything, up to the time when he had been hurt, and after the moment when he had at first come to himself in the room where he now was. His eyes opened again, and he saw and recognised the Mother Superior, whom he had often seen and spoken

with during his brother's stay in the hospital. Suddenly he was quite himself, for his hurt was altogether local and he had lost little blood; he only felt half paralysed on that side.

'Were there many killed?' he asked quietly.

'We do not know,' the Mother answered. 'When it is a little later I will telephone for news. It is barely five o'clock yet.'

'Thank you, Mother.' He shut his eyes again and said no more.

The Mother Superior opened the window and let in the fresh morning air, full of the glow of the rising sun, for the room looked to the eastward, across the broad bend of the Tiber and towards the Palatine. She turned out the electric light in the corner, then went to the window again and refreshed herself by drawing long breaths at regular intervals, as she had been taught to do when she was a beginner at nursing. Presently the injured man called her and she went to the bedside again.

'It would be very kind of you to take down a few words which I should like to dictate,' he said. 'No,' he continued quickly, as he saw a grave look in the nun's face, 'it is not my will! It will be a short report of what happened before the explosion. They will want it at headquarters and my head is quite clear now. Will you write for me, Mother?'

'Of course.'

There is always a pencil with a memorandum-pad in every private room of a hospital, for the use of the nurse and the doctor. The Mother Superior took both

from the table and sat down close to the bed, and Giovanni dictated what he had to say in a clear and businesslike way that surprised her, great as her experience had been. When he had finished, he asked her to read it over to him, and pointed out one small correction to be made.

'I think I can sign it with my left hand, if you will hold it up for me,' he said.

His fingers traced his name with the pencil, though very unsteadily, and he begged her to send it to headquarters at once. There was always some one on duty there, he explained, if it was only the subaltern commanding the guard. She need not be afraid of leaving him alone for a few moments, he added, for he was in no pain and did not feel at all faint. Besides, she would now send him another nurse — he had not thanked her for taking care of him herself during the night — he hoped she would forgive his omission — he was still ——

And thereupon, while in the very act of speaking, he fell asleep again, exhausted by the effort he had made, and still under the influence of the strong drug. The Mother understood, glanced at him and slipped away, closing the door very softly. She knew that stage of awakening from the influence of opium, with its alternating 'zones' of sleep and waking.

It was half-past five now, and a spring morning, and all was astir downstairs; lay sisters were gathering the broken glass into baskets, the portress was clearing away the wreck of broken panes from the outer hall, and the nun who had charge of the chapel was preparing

the altar for matins. No one was surprised to see the Mother Superior in the cloister so early, for she was often the first to rise and almost always the last to go to rest; the novices said that the little white volcano never slept at all, but was only 'quiescent' during a part of the night.

She found one of the orderlies scrubbing the outer doorstep, and despatched him at once with Giovanni's report, which she had put into an envelope and directed. He was to bring back an answer if there was any; and when he was gone, as he had not finished his job, she took the scrubbing broom in her small hands and finished it herself, with more energy, perhaps, than had been expended upon the stones for some time. Before she had quite done, the portress caught sight of her and was filled with horror.

'For the love of heaven!' she cried, trying to take the broom herself.

The nun would not let it go, however, and pushed her aside gently, with a smile.

'If any one should see your Reverence!' protested the portress.

'My dear Anna,' answered the Mother Superior, giving the finishing strokes, 'they would see an old woman washing a doorstep, and no harm would be done.'

But the example remained impressed on the good lay sister's mind for ever, and to her last days she will never tire of telling the novices how the Mother Superior washed the doorstep of the hospital herself on the morning after the explosion at Monteverde.

The delivery of the report produced a more immediate

result than either Giovanni or the Mother had expected. The accident had happened near sunset, and the story of Giovanni's heroic behaviour had been repeated everywhere before midnight. The men who had found him had, of course, reported the fact after the first confusion was over, but it was some time before the news got up to any superior officer, though the King's aide-de-camp had left instructions that any information about Giovanni was to be telephoned to the Quirinal at once. When it had been understood at last that he was in the private hospital of the White Sisters, badly injured but alive, it was too late to think of sending an officer to make inquiries in person. On the other hand, six o'clock in the morning is not too early for most modern sovereigns, general officers, and members of the really hard-working professions, among which literature is sometimes included. In half-an-hour Giovanni's little report had been read, copied, telephoned, and telegraphed, and in less than half-an-hour more a magnificent personage in the uniform of a colonel of cavalry on the General Staff, accompanied by a less gorgeous but extremely smart subaltern, stopped at the door of the Convent hospital in a Court carriage. He came to ask after Captain Severi on behalf of the Sovereign, and to ascertain whether he could perhaps be seen during the morning. He was told that this must depend on the surgeon's decision; he expressed his thanks to the portress with extreme civility and drove away again. Before long other officers came to make similar inquiries, in various uniforms and in slightly varying degrees of smartness,

from the representative of the War Office and the Commander-in-Chief's aide-de-camp to unpretending subalterns in undress uniform, who were on more or less friendly terms with Giovanni and were suddenly very proud of it, since he had become a hero.

Then came the reporters and besieged the door for news — an untidy lot of men at that hour, unshaven, hastily dressed, and very sorry for themselves because they had been beaten up by their respective papers so early in the morning. They were also extremely disappointed because the portress had no story to tell and would not hear of letting them in; and they variously described her afterwards as Cerberus, Argus, and the Angel of the Flaming Sword, which things agree not well together. The portress had a busy morning, even after Doctor Pieri had come and had written out a bulletin which she could show to all comers as an official statement of the injured man's condition.

The great surgeon and the Mother Superior sat on opposite sides of his bed, and now that the sun had risen high the blinds were half drawn together and hooked in the old-fashioned Roman way, to keep out some of the light, while the glass was left open. A broad stripe of sunshine fell across the counterpane below Giovanni's knees, and a sharp twittering and a rushing of wings broke the stillness every few seconds, as the circling swallows flew past the half-open window.

'So you refuse to undergo the operation?' Pieri said, after a long pause. 'Is that your last word? Shall I go away and leave you to die?'

Superior turned on him suddenly from the window, her small face very white.

'It is suicide,' she said — 'deliberate, intentional suicide, and no right-thinking man, priest or layman, would call it by any other name, let Doctor Pieri say what he will! You are in full possession of your senses, and even of your health and strength, at this moment, and you are assured that you run no risk if you submit to the doctors, but that if you will not you must die! You are choosing death where you can choose life, and that is suicide if anything is! Doctor Pieri knows well enough what a good priest would say, and so do I, who have been a nurse for a quarter of a century! If the injury were internal, and if there were a real risk to your life in operating, you would have the right, the moral right, to choose between the danger of dying under ether and the comparative certainty of dying of the injury. But this is a specific case. You are young, strong, absolutely healthy, and the chance of your dying from the anæsthetic is not one in thousands, whereas, if nothing is done, death is certain. I ask you, before God and man and on your honour, whether you do not know that you are committing suicide — nothing less than cowardly, dastardly self-murder!'

'If I am, it is my affair,' answered Giovanni coldly; 'but you need not leave out the rest. You believe that if I choose to die I shall go straight to everlasting punishment. I believe that if there is a God — and I do not deny that there may be — I shall not be damned because I would rather not live at all than go on living as half a

man. And now, if you will let me have a cup of coffee and a roll, I shall be very grateful, for I have had nothing to eat since yesterday at one o'clock!'

He probably knew well enough what such a request meant just then — the putting off of a possible operation for hours, owing to the impossibility of giving ether to a man who has lately eaten anything. The Mother Superior and the surgeon looked at each other rather blankly.

'Shall I die any sooner if I am starved?' asked Giovanni almost roughly.

Pieri began to explain the danger, but Severi at once grew more impatient.

'I know all that,' he said, 'and I have told you my decision. I refuse to undergo an operation. If you choose to make me suffer from starvation I suppose it is in your power, though I am not sure. I fancy I can still stand and walk, and even my one hand may be of some use! If you do not give me something to eat, I shall get out of bed and fight my way to the larder!'

He smiled as he uttered the threat, as if he were not jesting about his own death. Pieri did not like it, and turned to the door.

'Since you talk of fighting,' he said, 'I would give you ether by force, if I could, and let the law do what it would after I had saved your life in spite of you! If you chose to blow your brains out afterwards, that would not concern me!'

Thereupon he disappeared, shutting the door more sharply than doctors usually do when they leave a sick-room. The Mother Superior went to the bedside and

leaned over Giovanni, looking into his eyes with an expression of profoundest entreaty.

'I implore you to change your mind,' she said in a low and beseeching voice, 'for the sake of the mother who bore you ——'

'She is dead,' Giovanni answered quietly.

'For the sake of them that live and love you, them ——'

'There is only one, Mother, and you know it; but for that only one's love I would live, not merely with one arm, but if every bone in my body were broken and twisted out of shape beyond remedy. Mother, go and tell her so, and bring me her answer — will you?'

The nun straightened herself, and her face showed what she suffered; but Giovanni did not understand.

'You are afraid,' he said, with rising contempt in his tone. 'You are afraid to take my message. It would move her! It might tempt her from the right way! It might put it into her head to beg for a dispensation after all, and the sin would be on your soul! I understand — I did not really mean that you should ask her. You let her watch here last night when you knew I could not waken, but you were careful that she should be gone before I opened my eyes. You see, I have guessed the truth! I only wonder why you let her stay at all!'

He moved his head impatiently on the pillow. The Mother Superior had drawn herself up rather proudly, folding her hands under her scapular and looking down at him coldly, her face like a marble mask again.

'You are quite mistaken,' she said. 'I will deliver

your message and Sister Giovanna shall give you her answer herself.'

She went towards the door, gliding across the floor noiselessly in her felt shoes; but just before she went out she turned to Giovanni again, and suddenly her eyes were blazing like live coals.

'And if you have the heart to kill yourself when you have talked with her,' she said, 'you are a coward, who never deserved to live and be called a man!'

She was gone before Giovanni could have answered, and the man who had risked life and limb to save others twelve hours earlier smiled faintly at the good Mother's womanly wrath and feminine invective.

He lay still on his back, staring at the ceiling, and he began to wonder what day of the week it would be when he would not be able to see it any more, and whether the end would come at night, or when the sunlight was streaming in, or on a rainy afternoon. He did not believe that Angela would be with him in a few minutes, and if she came — she would say ——

The strength of the morphia was not yet quite spent, and he fell asleep in the middle of his train of thought, as had happened while he was speaking to the Mother in the early morning.

When he awoke the broad stripe of sunshine no longer fell across the counterpane, but lay on the gleaming tiles beyond the foot of the bed; and it fell, too, on Sister Giovanna's white frock and veil, for she was standing there motionless, waiting for him to waken. His head felt queer for a moment, and he wondered

whether she would be standing on the same spot, with the same look, when he would be dying, a few days hence. There were deep purplish-brown rings under her eyes, which seemed to have sunk deeper in their sockets; there was no colour in her lips, or scarcely more than a shade; her young cheeks had grown suddenly hollow. For the Mother — her mother — had told her everything, and it was almost more than she could bear.

He looked at her two or three times, fixing his eyes on the ceiling in the intervals, to make sure that it was she and that he was awake; for there was something in his head that disturbed him now, a sort of beating on one side of the brain, with a dull feeling at the back, as if there were a quantity of warm lead there that kept his skull on the pillow. It was the beginning of fever, but he did not know it; it was the forewarner of the death he was choosing. The experienced nurse saw it in his face.

'Giovanni, do you know me?' she asked softly, coming a step nearer. Instantly, he had all his faculties again.

'Yes; come to me,' he answered.

She came nearer and stood beside him.

'Sit down,' he said. 'This is the side — the side of my good arm. Sit down and let me take your hand, dear.'

She wondered at his quiet tone and gentle manner. They almost frightened her, for she remembered taking care of impatient, short-tempered people who had sud-

denly softened like this just at the end. But there was no reason in the world why he should die now, and she dismissed the thought as she took the hand he put out and held it. It was icy cold, as strong men's hands generally are when a fever is just beginning. She tried to warm it between hers, covering it up between her palms as much as she could; but she herself was not warm either, for she had been in her cell, where there was no sun in the morning, and the air was chilly and damp, because it had rained in all night.

Giovanni spoke again before she could find words.

'My life is in your hands, with my hand, Angela,' he said. 'Do what you will with it.'

He felt that she shook from head to foot, like a young tree that is rudely struck. He went on, as if he had prepared his words, though he had not even thought of them.

'With your love and your companionship, I shall not miss a limb, I shall not regret my profession, I shall be perfectly happy. Alone, I will not be forced artificially to live out my life a wretched cripple.'

It was brutal, and perhaps he knew it; but he was desperate and fate had given him a weapon to move any woman. In plain truth, it was as cruel as if he had put a pistol to his head and threatened to pull the trigger if she would not marry him. He had not done that yet, even when she had been in his room at Monteverde and the loaded revolver had been between them.

Sister Giovanna kept his hand bravely in hers and sat still, though it was hard. The question which

must be answered, and which she alone could answer, had been asked with frightful directness, and though she had known only too well that it was coming, its tremendous import paralysed her and she could not speak.

It was plainly this: Should she kill him, of her own free will, for the sake of the solemn vow she had taken? Or should she save his life by breaking, even under permission, what she looked on as an absolutely inviolable promise?

What made her position most terrible was the absolute certainty of the fatal result, and its close imminence. In his condition, to put off the operation for another day, in order to consider her answer, would be to condemn him to death according to all probability of human science, since a few hours longer than that would put probability out of the question and make it a positive certainty. She could not speak; her tongue would not move when she tried to form words and her breath made no sound in her throat.

For some time Giovanni said nothing more, and lay quite still. When he spoke again, his voice was gentle.

'Dear, since it must be, I should like it to come like this, if you will — with my hand between yours.'

It was too much, and she cried aloud and bowed herself. But the mortal pain freed her tongue, and a moment later she broke out in a fervent appeal.

'Live, Giovanni, live — for Christ's good sake who died for you — for my sake, too — for your own! Live the life that is still before you, and you can make it great! If you love me, make it a noble life for that,

if for nothing else! Do you know, all Rome is ringing with the story of what you did last night — the King, the Court, the Ministers are sending for news of you every half-hour — the world is calling you a hero — will you let them think that you are afraid of an operation, or will you let my enemy tell the world that you have let yourself die for my sake? That is what it comes to, one or the other of those things!'

Severi smiled faintly and shook his head without lifting it from the pillow.

'No man will call me coward,' he answered; 'and no one would believe Princess Chiaromonte — not if she took oath on her death-bed!'

'Will nothing move you?' cried the unhappy woman, in utter despair. 'Nothing that I can say? Not the thought of what life will mean to me when you are gone? Not my solemn assurance that I can do nothing — nothing ——'

'You can!' Giovanni cried, with sudden and angry energy. 'You are willing to let me die rather than risk the salvation of your own soul. That is the naked truth of all this.'

Her hands left his as if they had lost their strength, and she rose at the same instant and tottered backwards against the near wall, speechless and transfixed with horror at the mere thought that what he said might be true.

But Giovanni's eyes did not follow her; the door had opened quietly, and Monsignor Saracinesca was there and had heard the last words.

The prelate's face expressed neither displeasure nor reproach; it was only very thoughtful.

Giovanni was in no humour to receive a visit from a priest just then, even though the latter was an old acquaintance and had once been a friend. Moreover, the last time they had been together, they had parted on anything but good terms. Giovanni spoke first.

'Have you come, like the others, to accuse me of committing suicide?' he asked.

The answer was unexpected and uncompromising.

'No.'

Sister Giovanna, still half-stunned and steadying herself against the wall, turned wondering eyes to the speaker. The angry look in Severi's face changed to one of inquiry. He strongly suspected that the churchman had come to 'convert' him, as the phrase goes, and he was curious to see what line of argument a man of such intelligence and integrity would take.

'No,' repeated Monsignor Saracinesca, 'I have come for quite another purpose, which I hope to accomplish if you will listen to reason.'

The nun stood erect now, though still leaning back against the wall, and she had hidden her hands under her scapular.

'I do not think I am unreasonable,' Giovanni answered quietly. 'My position is this ——'

'Do not tire yourself by going over it all,' the prelate answered. 'I understand your position perfectly, for I have been with the Mother Superior nearly half-an-hour. I am going to take something upon myself,

as a man, which some of my profession may condemn. I am going to do it because I believe it is the right course, and I trust that God will forgive me if it is not.'

There was a tremor in the good man's voice, and he ceased speaking, as if to repeat inwardly the solemn words he had just spoken.

'What are you going to do?' asked Giovanni Severi.

On the question, the nun came forward and rested one hand on the chair in which she had sat, leaning towards the prelate at the same time, with parted lips and eyes full of a strange anticipation.

'You know, I daresay, that I am Secretary to the Cardinal Vicar, and that such cases as yours are to a great extent within my province?'

Giovanni did not know this, but nodded; the nun, who knew it, bent her head, wondering more and more what was coming, and not daring to guess. Neither spoke.

'I am going to lay the whole matter before the Cardinal Vicar at once,' Monsignor Saracinesca continued calmly. 'I can be with him in twenty minutes, and I am going to tell him the plain truth. I do not think that any nun was ever more true to her vows than Sister Giovanna has been since your return. But there is a limit beyond which fidelity to an obligation may bring ruin and even death on some one whom the promise did not at first concern. When the limit is reached, it is the plain duty of those who have received that promise to relieve the maker of it from its observance, even though not asked to do so. That is what I

am going to say to the Cardinal Vicar in half-an-hour. Are you satisfied?'

Sister Giovanna sank sideways upon the chair, with her arm resting on the back of it, and she hid her face in her sleeve.

'Will the Cardinal listen to you?' asked Giovanni, his voice unsteady with emotion.

'What I recommend is usually done,' answered the prelate, without a shade of arrogance, but with the quiet certainty of a man in power. 'What I ask of you is, to submit at once to the operation that alone can save you, on the strength of my assurance that I am going to do my utmost to obtain what you desire.'

'It is hard to believe!' Giovanni exclaimed, almost to himself.

The nun moved her head silently from side to side without lifting her face from her arm.

'You can believe me,' Monsignor Saracinesca answered. 'I give you my solemn promise before God, and my word of honour before men, that I will do the utmost in my power to succeed. Do you believe me?'

Giovanni held out his sound hand. The churchman came nearer and took it.

'Will you risk the operation on that?' he asked.

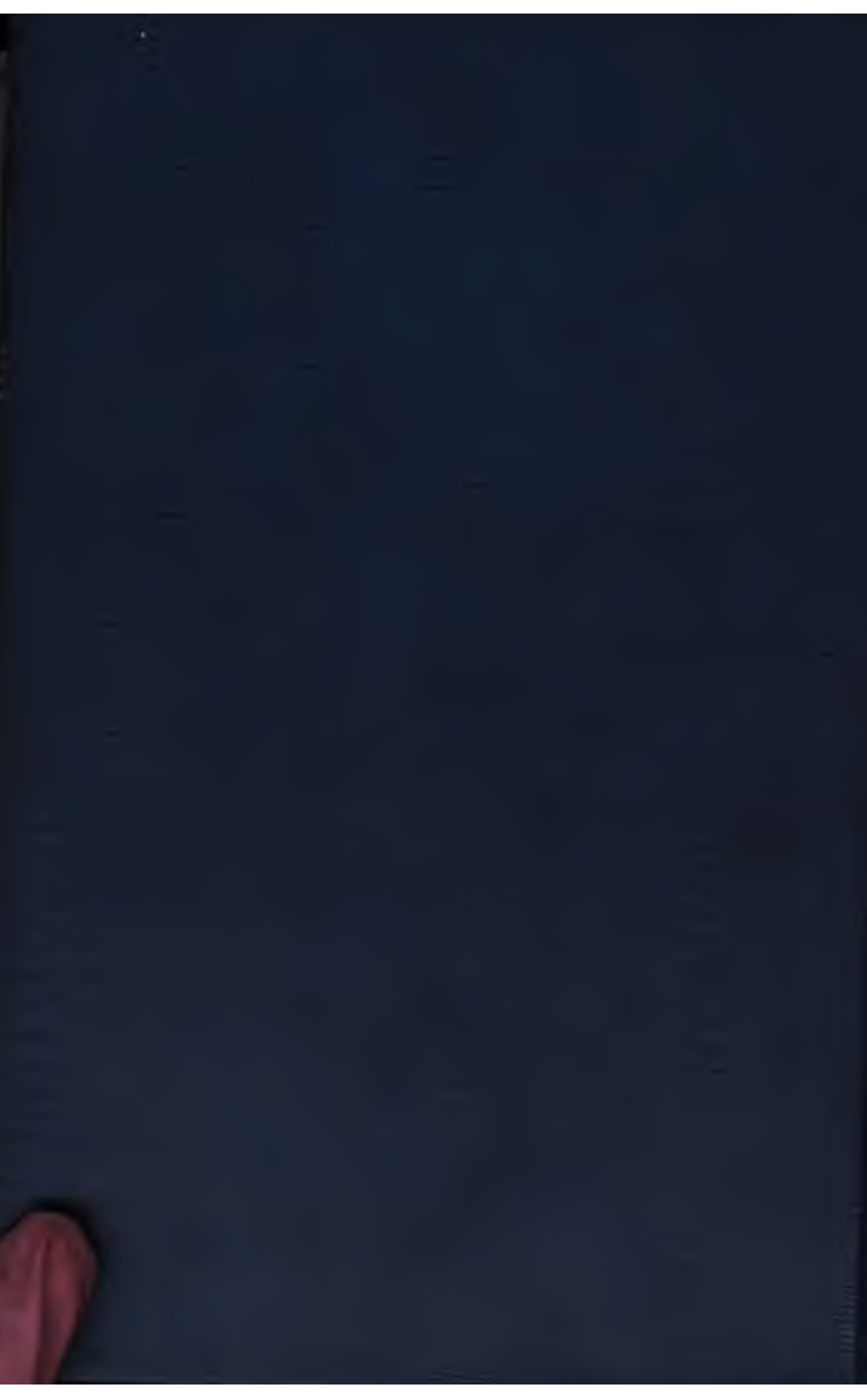
The light of a profound gratitude illuminated the young soldier's tired face, and his fingers pressed Monsignor Saracinesca's spasmodically; but his voice was quiet when he spoke.

'Sister Giovanna ——'

'Yes?'

The nun looked up suddenly and drew a sharp breath, for her joy was almost agonising.

'Will you kindly go and tell Doctor Pieri that I am ready?'

The nun rose with a spring and was at the door in an instant, and in her heart rang such a chorus of glory and rejoicing as not even the angels have heard since the Morning Stars sang together.

Of her, I think the most rigid cannot say that she had not endured to the end, for her vow's sake. Whether the churchman was too human in his sympathies or not may be an open question; if he was, he had the courage to make himself alone responsible, for, as he had foretold, what he recommended was done; if he was wrong, he has at least the consolation of having brought unspeakable happiness to three human beings. For the mother, whose heart had so nearly broken for her child, had her share of joy, too, and it was no small one.